

**CHRISTIAN ASHRAMS OF TAMIL NADU AND KERALA: A REGIONAL  
STUDY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE (1920-2003)**

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DECLARATION**

## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the thesis entitled, “CHRISTIAN ASHRAMS OF TAMIL NADU AND KERALA: A REGIONAL STUDY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE (1920-2003)” completed and written by me has not previously formed the basis for the award of any Degree or other similar title of this or any other University or examining body.

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## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled **Christian Ashrams of Tamil Nadu and Kerala: A Regional Study in Historical Perspective (1920-2003)** which is being submitted herewith the award of the degree of Vidyavachaspati (Ph.D) in History of Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune, is the result of original research work completed by Shri Simon Yesu under my supervision and guidance. To the best of my knowledge and belief the work incorporated in this thesis has not formed the basis for the award of any Degree or similar title of this or any other University or examining body.

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# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

## CONTENTS

<b>PREFACE</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>xiii</b>
<b>GLOSSARY</b> .....	<b>xiv</b>
<b>I. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Statement of the Problem.....	3
Objectives of the Study .....	4
Significance of the Study .....	4
Statement of Hypotheses.....	4
Basic Assumptions.....	5
Methodology .....	5
Source Material .....	5
The Regional Conception of Historical Research.....	6
Scope of the study .....	6
Limitations .....	6
Organization of the study.....	7
Historical Background of Ashrams in India .....	7
Indian Ashrams in Ancient Period.....	7
Indian Ashrams in Medieval Period .....	11
Indian Ashrams in Modern Period.....	12
History of Christian Ashrams in India: A General Overview.....	21
Origins of Christianity .....	21
Growth and Spread of Christianity .....	22
Arrival of Christian Ashrams in India .....	23
The Role of Early Christian monasticism on the Establishment of Indian Christian Ashrams .....	25
Quest for Catholicity an impetus for Christian ashrams.....	28
Life at the Ashram .....	28
History of Christian Ashrams in India: A critical comparison of Hindu and Christian Ashrams.....	29
Reasons for starting Christian Ashrams.....	33
<b>II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE</b> .....	<b>43</b>
Summary.....	50
<b>III. CHRISTIAN ASHRAMS OF TAMIL NADU: THEIR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL CONTRIBUTION (1920-2003)</b> .....	<b>56</b>
Christianity in Tamil Nadu .....	56

Christu-Kula Ashram .....	57
Origin of Christukula Ashram .....	57
Regional Identification and Affiliation of Christukula Ashram .....	59
Vision and Objectives of Christukula Ashram .....	59
Contribution of Christukula Ashram to Society .....	60
Problems and Challenges .....	62
Saccidananda Ashram .....	63
Location .....	63
Historical Background .....	63
Contribution of Saccidananda Ashram to Society .....	64
Christu-Shishya Ashram .....	66
Location .....	66
Historical Background of the Ashram .....	66
Regional identification and affiliation of Christa Sishya Ashram .....	67
Contribution of Christu-Shishya Ashram to Society .....	67
Problems and challenges .....	69
Anbu Vazhvu Ashram .....	70
Introduction .....	70
Historical Background .....	70
Ideology of Fr. Philip .....	71
Contributions of Anbu Vazhvu Ashram to Society .....	76
Church Missionary Society (CMS) Ashram, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu .....	79
Location .....	79
Establishment .....	79
Eventful period of CMS (1896 – 1924) .....	80
Contributions to Society .....	81
<b>IV. CHRISTIAN ASHRAMS OF KERALA: THEIR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL CONTRIBUTION .....</b>	<b>90</b>
Christianity in Kerala .....	90
Christavashram .....	91
The Role of Acharya K.K. Chandy .....	93
Lifestyle and Organization .....	96
Christavashram in the 21st Century .....	100
Contributions of Christavashram to Society .....	103
Kurisumala Ashram .....	104
Introduction .....	104
Organization and Operations .....	105
Features .....	106
Day-to-Day Life .....	107
Fields of Activity .....	108
Spiritual Objectives .....	109
Ancient Tradition at Kurisumala .....	110



Divine Retreat Center (POTTA) ashram .....	112
Introduction.....	112
Activities of the Charismatic Renewal in India .....	114
Hope for the Abandoned.....	114
Contributions of Divine Retreat Centre to Society .....	117
Bethany Ashram.....	119
History of Bethany Ashram .....	119
Activities at Bethany Ashram .....	120
Provinces.....	121
Bethel Ashram .....	124
Location.....	124
Historical Background.....	124
Contributions of Bethel Ashram to Society .....	125

**V. CRITICAL AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CHRISTIAN ASHRAMS IN TAMIL NADU AND KERALA ..... 133**

Introduction .....	133
Christian Virtues Practiced In Ashrams .....	134
Ashrams in Tamil Nadu.....	134
Christukula Ashram .....	135
Saccidananda Ashram.....	135
Christu-Shishya Ashram.....	135
Anbu Vazhvu Ashram.....	136
Church Missionary Society.....	137
Ashrams in Kerala .....	137
Christavashram .....	138
Kurisumala Ashram .....	138
Divine Retreat Center (Potta Ashram).....	139
Bethany Ashram.....	139
Bethel Ashram .....	139
Christian Ashrams in Tamil Nadu and Kerala Analysis of Values, Ancient and Current Practices .....	141
Critical and comparative analysis .....	143
Ashrams in Tamil Nadu.....	143
Objectives .....	143
Education .....	144
Religious and Spiritual Needs.....	145
Social Services .....	145
Health.....	147
Other Contributions .....	147
Problems and Challenges.....	148
Ashrams in Kerala.....	149

Objectives .....	149
Education .....	150
Religious and Spiritual Needs.....	152
Social Service.....	153
Health.....	155
Other contributions .....	155
Conclusion.....	156
VI. CONCLUSION.....	159
VII. APPENDIXES .....	167
VIII. BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	182

**CHAPTER 1**

**INTRODUCTION**

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

An ashram is defined as “a spontaneous community of seekers or disciples gathered around a spiritual leader, called a guru, who points a way toward salvation”<sup>1</sup>. Traditionally, in India, this was a Hindu refuge where saints and rishis lived in serenity and bliss among nature. Of course, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the term “ashram” is commonly used in reference to a united community conceived chiefly for the immaterial upliftment of its members, frequently guided by a spiritual teacher or a saint.<sup>2</sup> However, the simple but fundamental meaning of ashram (a-shram, a-siramam), which is great or strenuous effort<sup>3</sup> still remains. An ashram thus stands for a spiritually charged effort. The word “ashram” is derived from the Sanskrit term “aashraya” which is literally translated as “security”.<sup>4</sup>

In India ashrams constitute one of the most important institutions of spirituality and cultural heritage. They are the most ancient institutions, though they are not institutions as a way of life. Their origin dates back to the time of the *Aranyakas*, the forest books, in the Vedic period.<sup>5</sup> This is when the rishis withdrew to the forest to meditate and made the discovery of the indwelling presence of God, the Atman, and the inner Self. Through these meditations the Upanishads, the discourses of the rishis, were derived.<sup>6</sup>

For years these centres have been pivots of community life guiding innumerable souls along the inward journey of spirituality and they continue to maintain the spiritual welfare of human life. They have been monumental significant pieces of the historical architecture of Indian culture and tradition. They have stood as pillars of the wisdom and teachings of India’s diverse and rich historical ancestry and have also made significant contributions to the Indian society as a whole and the yogic system in particular.<sup>7</sup>

Ashrams tradition has guided the philosophical and spiritual construction of India's yogic system as ashrams are identified as an all-inclusive, fundamental and most enduring spiritual vehicle of Indian culture available to all faiths that are rooted

in the Indian soil.<sup>8</sup> They have drastically altered social and political affairs throughout the history of India, significantly altering and often times improving the quality of spiritual life in the society. Ashrams were not always used by those who had spiritual conquest or aspirations to become a saint or sage, and were also frequented by laymen who sought instruction in some art.<sup>9</sup>

However, not many people fully understand and appreciate ashrams and their conception of life and contribution to society. As Noreen Barbara rightly observes, often, “[t]he term Ashram flashes the images of a bearded and scantily clad guru, spiritual seeking, meditation, asceticism, wilderness-retreat for silence and solitude, poverty, a band of adoring disciples, a life of prayer, service, volunteerism, among others of mystical nature.”<sup>10</sup> While this might be a true description of many founders of ashrams, it does not portray a true picture of a typical ashram as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

Traditionally, ashrams were situated in remote locations which were far removed from city life and human habitation. Often this was in desolate woodlands or mountainous areas immersed in a natural environment conducive to spiritual insight, practice and consecration. Today Ashrams are scattered throughout the whole of India, from the very southern tip of India all the way up until the snow capped mountains of the Himalayas and they still remain an integral part of Indian culture.

While their rules have changed,<sup>12</sup> ashrams still provide spiritual refuge and retreat for individuals who are seeking spiritual art, and give an opportunity to learn more about themselves and the life of spirituality. For instance, Christian Ashrams have started to open courses and residential housing for people of different ethnic, social, religious and national backgrounds that wish to learn about their spiritual life.<sup>13</sup>

While the concept of ashram is often identified with Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism traditionally, an Indian Christian ashram “is not and cannot be a cultural oddity in India”.<sup>14</sup> The spiritual life that Jesus lived embodied all these aspects so completely.<sup>15</sup> The great monastic traditions of the Middle East and Europe from the 4<sup>th</sup> century to this day have attempted to reflect their master’s ways in the lives of communities of monks and nuns, and individual hermits.<sup>16</sup>

The Indian and Christian traditions of spiritual seeking are remarkable in their independent and parallel development though with much in common.<sup>17</sup> It is not surprising to see that these traditions had most naturally converged and influenced one another from the first century onwards.<sup>18</sup>

Saint Thomas, the skeptic among Christ's disciples, was called upon to follow the ways of his master's life and teachings and to bear witness to the incarnate word of God to all nations.<sup>19</sup> In obedience to his call he appeared on the Indian scene as Guru Thomas<sup>20</sup> two thousand years ago. The formation of Indian culture thus affected was far more significant than hitherto acknowledged. A re-examination of the Indian religious traditions and scholarship in Tamil literature in the last fifty years has revealed evidences of a wider and significant penetration of Christian thought from 1<sup>st</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> C.E. in Buddhist, Saivite and Vaishnavite doctrines, anti in the bakthi movement.<sup>21</sup>

These extraordinary findings of a wider and seminal Christian presence in Indian culture are truly significant for the reconstruction and re-evaluation of the story of the historical perspective of the story of the Christian Ashrams.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Christian ashrams have been around in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, respectively, since 1900 and they have played a significant role in their various contributions to the societies surrounding them. Between the year 1920 and 2003 many Christian ashrams have been founded and established in these states of southern India but most of these ashrams are still not known to the world beyond their immediate surroundings. Though studies on Christian Ashrams have been done, there seems to be no regional study focusing on the origins of these institutions so far done from a historical perspective.

This study was undertaken to bring to the public's attention both of the existence of these Christian ashrams in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, respectively, from a historical perspective. This paper, therefore, traces the historical development and contribution to society of these ashrams in the years spanning from 1920 through 2003.

### **Objectives of the Study**

Objectives of this study were as follows:

1. To give the historical background of the Christian Ashrams in Tamil Nadu and Kerala State of South India.
2. To find out the Christian virtues practiced in Ashrams.
3. To analyze the values of the ancient and the current religious practices in Ashrams.
4. To analyze the contribution of Christian Ashrams to social life.
5. To assess and evaluate the impact of foreign forms of worship in comparison with indigenous forms of worship.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study includes though not limited to the following:

It provides an understanding of Christian ashrams in Tamil Nadu and Kerala from a historical perspective, their contribution to the culture, social and general life of the communities around them. An understanding of Christian ashram in Tamil Nadu and Kerala can in turn serve to shed light on the Christian ashram movements in other states.

The study also brings to light the spiritual virtues practiced in ancient and present Christian Ashrams. Further, the study may also help people in appreciating the developments and changes taking place in the lives of these ashrams relative to the changing times.

Lastly, by bringing to light the original reasons and visions for the establishment of Christian ashrams, this work may also act as a tool to prevent both current and future leadership of the Christian churches from sidetracking from the noble goals upon which these institutions were founded. Thus it may act as a modulating tool to ensure that no departure from the original ideals conceived by the founding fathers takes place.

### **Statement of Hypotheses**

1. All Christian ashrams have similar and dissimilar origins and historical backgrounds
2. All the Christian ashrams have similar and dissimilar ideologies and they elicit similar and dissimilar responses from their communities

3. All Christian ashrams in the 21<sup>st</sup> century still practice the ancient Christian ashram virtues
4. Christian Ashrams in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are still as attractive to the communities as they were in ancient times.
5. All Christian ashrams have similar and dissimilar objectives

### **Basic Assumptions**

1. The information about the historical perspective of Christian ashrams in Tamil Nadu and Kerala will remain unknown as long as there is no study on the same.
2. The Christian Ashrams in Tamil Nadu and Kerala states in South India have the same historical perspective.
3. It is assumed that the interviewees were honest and knowledgeable in their respective fields and provided reliable data

### **Methodology**

This research utilizes the descriptive method of research in which data is collected, compared and analyzed to arrive at and establish facts there in narrated.

History is considered as a social science that uses diaries, letters, secondary accounts, and documents as its tools of inquiry<sup>22</sup>. Its methodology is that of organizing material into some meaningful interpretation that is controlled, to a degree, by the background, experiences, and biases of the writer, as well as the discovered or 'cultural truths preserved over time. As a result the word "history" may not necessarily mean 'actuality' of what happened but a given historian's interpretation of the data available to them on what happened. This is often controlled to some extent by the society and the time in which the historian lives.

### **Source Material**

Personal visits to sampled out Christian Ashrams both in Tamil Nadu and Kerala were made to collect the primary data that informs this investigation. Besides onsite interviews and dialogues conducted as the main source of data, respective relevant periodicals, journals and unpublished manuscripts have been consulted in this work. These constitute the main primary sources of this research while books written by various scholars in the field constitute the secondary sources for this work.



## **The Regional Conception of Historical Research**

From the personal visits made by the researcher to the various Christian Ashrams established in the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala and from the interviews conducted therein in addition to extensive extract of information from the Archives stored in these Ashrams, it appeared that, the Ashrams were meant not just for spiritual upliftment and solitude, but aim at rendering voluntary services to the public in medical, spiritual and psychological areas.

The main objective of the people taking shelter in these Christian Ashrams was to follow the teachings of Christ and to help others, which was evident from the functioning of the Ashrams that the researcher has visited.

### **Scope of the study**

This enquiry is limited to the history of Christian ashrams in Tamil Nadu and Kerala states, South India covering the period between 1920 and 2003. It seeks to address the following questions: what were the origins of Christian ashrams in Tamil Nadu and Kerala states, respectively? How do they operate and why were they established? What is their contribution and impact to the surrounding communities and who are the beneficiaries of their services? What are the similarities and dissimilarities between these Christian ashrams and Hindu ashrams in the same area? It is in no way an attempt to evaluate the truthfulness or falsity of the views, ideologies and beliefs of any of these ashrams under study.

In this inquiry, the term “ashram” is used inclusively to cover even those Christian churches and institutions which are not formally called ashrams. This is particularly true of Christian missionary societies.

### **Limitations**

There was a scarcity of written sources from which to draw data on the history of some of the Christian ashrams in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Little is written on these ashrams owing to the fact that hardly anyone has expressed interest in researching about them.

### **Organization of the study**

Chapter 1 is introduction to the research. It briefly outlines the main ideas covered in this enquiry with special reference to the general history of ashrams both

ancient and modern. It also discusses the objectives of this study, its significance and the problem it seeks to address and other relevant pedagogical issues.

Chapter 2 presents a review of related literature available on the topic. The review is not exhaustive but it is extensive enough to provide a palpable picture of the situation at the time of this research.

Chapter 3 discusses the Christian Ashrams of Tamil Nadu in general covering the period between 1920 and 2003. The focus is given to the five most important ashrams in this area, viz., Christu-Kula, Saccidananda, Christu-Shishya, Anbu Vazhvu and Church Missionary ashram.

Chapter 4 discusses the Christian ashrams in Kerala from 1920-2003, in general and especially gives prominence to five important ashrams in this area which are: Christav ashram, Kurisumala ashram, Divine Retreat Centre, Bethany ashram and Bethel.

Chapter 5 is a comparative analysis of Christian ashrams in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. It reviews the involvements and participation of these ashrams in the freedom movements and social reforms movements, caste systems issues and the role each of these ashrams played in these societal concerns.

Finally, chapter 6, Conclusion, presents a summary and conclusion for the entire paper. This is followed by appendices backing up some issues raised in the enquiry.

### **Historical Background of Ashrams in India**

Before a detailed discussion of the Christian ashrams of Tamil Nadu and Kerala is undertaken, a brief review of the general history of ashrams over the centuries will be discussed. This will provide a comprehensive background for the discussion of Christian ashrams in the aforementioned states that follows.

#### **Indian Ashrams in Ancient Period**

The ancient period is dominated by Hindu ashrams. The main objective of these ancient Hindu ashrams was not mere teaching or preaching but living<sup>23</sup>. The disciples were admitted into the ashram; that means to receive instruction and also to be trained in 'Sadhana'—the realization of an ideal<sup>24</sup>, which means 'laboratories for religious experiment'<sup>25</sup>.

The fundamental and main features of a Hindu ashram in Ancient Period were characterized by the following:<sup>26</sup>

1. The continual presence of a Rishi or a man of God revered by all for his life of holiness and purity.
2. 'Sadhana', the realization of an ideal. The prime objects of Ashrams were living and realization, not mere teaching or preaching or the mere imparting of knowledge of religious truths in an intellectual fashion.
3. Ashrams had no connection with any ecclesiastical or religious organization, but were not formally opposed to them. Ashrams helped to purify popular religion.
4. Primarily not intended for social service although social work to the extent demanded or self-expression was practiced.
5. Ashrams were located in forests, near a river, in the midst of very peaceful natural scenery. Their life of simplicity amidst these beautiful natural surroundings, inspired them to the worship of God.
6. Practicing Bramacharyam<sup>27</sup>—celibacy—all the disciples of rishis practiced Bramacharyam during their period of the training.
7. The Rishi attained outer and inner Shanthi (peace) through the reconciliation of the conflicting aspects of life. The Rishi and the disciples lived together as one family. In order to help them to realize the presence of God.

#### Rig-Veda to the Post-Vedic Period

The Vedic Ashrams exercised missionary influence of spreading spiritual culture, through rishis living in Ashrams; Rishis with their spirit permeating silently but surely a leaven-like manner. The Ashrams carried out experiments in religious ideas and the Rishis carried on an extensive research in medical science through the study of herbs, roots, et cetera, which they found growing everywhere around their forest dwellings.

#### Ashrams in Upanishad Period

The Upanishads are the culmination of the Indian search for truth or reality. The word Upanishad means to “sit at the feet of a Master.”<sup>28</sup> Hence, Upanishad is a teaching learnt by sitting at the feet of a master.

India has the unbroken tradition of the Guru communicating the truth to his disciples. It is a matter not just of communicating the truth through words but helping the disciple to find the truth for himself.

The Upanishads are also called Vedantas. Vedas are the revealed truths. “Anta” means “end”<sup>29</sup>. Hence, Vedanta is the “end of truth,” meaning that there is no knowledge beyond the Vedas.

During the Upanishad period there were various schools of thought which came up with the help of Rishis in Vedic period about ‘Brahman’ also there were various methods and practices of realizing the Brahman. The subject of enquiring was who is Brahman? and, who could know him? Each ashram represented a separate school of thought and type of 'Sadhana' (the realization an ideal).<sup>30</sup>

### **Divisions of Yoga**

In this period the practice of Yoga became the center of religious thought and idealism, and the ashrams became centres of Yogic culture and training. The authoritative account of Yogic thought and practice was brought about by Pattanjali, who lived during the Christian era.<sup>31</sup>

Another Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita offers the spirituality of the ashram life as the three-fold way of integration as follows:

#### **Raja yoga or Gnana yoga**

Gnana Yoga focuses on the role, power and efficacy of knowledge in attaining one’s spiritual aspirations. Gnana means “knowledge”. Through knowledge come actions and actions always produce results and the actions produced the more fruits or produced and cause trouble. It is Gnana Yogic to say that you detach yourself completely from actions and devote yourself to the invocation of god.<sup>32</sup>

#### **Karma yoga (yoga of action)**

Karma Yoga thought and its emphasis upon action was developed to Buddhism but the Buddhist emphasis on action had the motive of entrance into nirvana and an escape from life of misery, while the Karma Yogi taught Nishkama Karma, which means action without desire<sup>33</sup>. Karma is not fatalism but the power to decide the future by right actions. Karma really stood for the performance of religious duties.<sup>34</sup> Karma Yoga talks about the individual soul realizing oneness with the universal soul by doing one's duties without attachment to the fruits thereof.<sup>35</sup>

#### Bhakti yoga (yoga of devotion)

The word Bhakti means "devotion". Thus Bhakti yoga is a way of attaining at-one-ment with the divine soul, the Brahma, through acts of pious devotion. Bhakti represented a personal God but in its later stage it became a mere formal repetition of Ramayana or ceremonial bathing in sacred rivers etc.<sup>36</sup> The Bhakti movement was a more democratic which spread to all castes, was a union with god and was possible for all to be saved without any difference of castes.

#### Different stages of Yoga:

In the ancient Indian tradition, life was planned in four Ashrams or stages with the style of Yoga practiced in each stage chosen to match the circumstances of that stage. A life of 84+ years was sought, with each of the four stages being 21 years. Some revised these into four stages of 25 years, seeking a life of 100+ years. The purpose for this life planning was to attain the direct experience of Self-realization, Yoga or enlightenment in life in this world. Lifestyles may have changed since then but the basic idea of these four stages is as sound today as it was then.

Age	Ashram or Stage
(0-25)	<p><b>Brahmacharya/Student:</b> Learning the foundation of life style was the celibate student time of youth. The focus was on healthy, positive training and discipline, learning about spiritual, community, and family life</p>

(25-50)	<b>Grahasta/Householder:</b> The householder phase of life is when one lives with spouse and children to fulfill worldly interests and duties. It is an occasion of giving, living, learning, and loving in family and society, spiritual practices are done in the context of worldly life and service to the community.
(50-75)	<b>Vanaprastha/Hermitage:</b> In this stage it shifts towards more inner spiritual practices of meditation, contemplation and prayer. Then relationships with grown children and community have a role of a matured mentor. Lifestyle is simplified and the couple may retreat to a quieter place for deeper practices.
(75-100+)	<b>Sanyasa/Renunciate:</b> The elder person now retreats to spiritual goals in this final phase. There is a further shift towards being an elder teacher of spiritual knowledge. <sup>7</sup>

### **Importance of Yoga**

#### Shanthi (Peace)

The soul, having found God, and being united with him, is at peace with God and with all creation. It has established harmony with the universe.

#### Scientific Research

As the inmates of these ashrams dwelt in forests and depended for their physical sustenance upon what grew around them they also began to study the herbs and their healing properties. This developed a certain kind of research in medical science and they developed systems of therapy, for example, the Siddha system of medicine.<sup>37</sup> All these activities constituted part of the routine activities carried out at Indian ashrams.

### **Indian Ashrams in Medieval Period**

In medieval period Ashrams were not profound. It was a transition period when Buddhism was taking root in India in the centuries that preceded the birth of Christ. In South India, Buddhism was the prevailing religion in the period about the

time of Christ and in the early centuries after Christ.<sup>38</sup> Buddhism had its monasteries and viharas and was trying to express religious fervor in practical social service for the down-trodden and suffering ones. Again Hinduism had its revival in the medieval period, and a wave of Bhakti movement swept over the country. Due to these waves of movements Saivite revival became the most marked. Saivism had a mighty rival to contend with in Jainism, and extremely rigorous asceticism, and cave-dwelling monks.

### Shaivism

Shaivism (Sanskrit: शैवपंथ, śaiva pantha), also known as Shaivam (lit. 'associated with Shiva'), refers the god Shiva as supreme being and is one of the most widely followed sects of Hinduism. Followers of Shaivam, are called 'Shaivas,' and also 'Saivas' or 'Shaivites.' They believe that Shiva is all and in all, the creator, preserver, destroyer, revealer and concealer of all. Shaivism is widespread mostly in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia and other notable areas for practice of Shaivism in Southern Asia.

### Buddhism

In the thirteenth century B.C. the practice of Buddhism as a distinct and organized religion declined from the land of its origin but not without leaving a significant impact.<sup>39</sup> Hindus continued to absorb Buddhist practices and teachings, such as Ahimsa and the renunciation of the material world. Buddhist practice is most common in Himalayan areas like Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. Buddhism has been reemerging in India since the past century, due to its adoption by many Indian intellectuals, the migration of Buddhist Tibetan exiles, and the mass conversion of hundreds of thousands of Hindu Dalits.[9]

### **Indian Ashrams in Modern Period**

Modern Hindu ashrams have developed the old Ashram ideals further in adapting to modern needs in all conditions of life. For example is near Shantiniketan near Bolpur, a town, it has a High school on Ashrams lines recognized by the Calcutta University a hospital with a qualified doctors for treating the poor and an agricultural farm for demonstration of modern agricultural developments to the villagers, under the able management of a well-qualified Indian gentleman trained in America.

Satyagraha Ashram, was founded by Gandhiji is known to everyone. The Ashrams had a large number of workers in the spinning and weaving department, as well as an agricultural and a large dairy farm, tannery, etc., for the purpose of doing something to relieve unemployment, poverty and distress. It had also the Vidyapeeth for the training of young men for national service, besides the Khadi Technical School as a natural development in the working out of the central ideal.

The other features which are characteristics of Hindu Ashrams beside the presence of rishis are as follows:

### **Brahmacharyam or Celibacy**

One feature that characterized the Hindu ashrams was its promotion of a life of celibacy, which was traditionally known as “brahmacharyam”. Mahatma Gandhi though himself married popularized the concept of brahmacharyan so much so that it may not need a lengthy description any more here.

### **Ahimsa**

Ahimsa is translated as non-violence which is an attitude of mind which is in a harmonious relationship with the rest of the universe. In the most ancient ashrams ahimsa stood for the outer and inner 'Shanti' or peace through the reconciliation of the conflicting aspects of life. The Rishi and his disciples sought to live in harmony with the universe, loving all creation, both man and beast. Ahimsa is recognition of ‘the spiritual unity of mankind and of all life’. Ahimsa knows no fear nor does it generate fear in those with whom it has to deal. The result of fear is suspicion, doubt and hate, with the ultimate result of separation of mind from mind in an attitude of loss of confidence. Ahimsa seeks to gain love by giving love. It breaks the middle wall of partition that separates humanity and disperses the cloud of mistrust and misunderstanding. Ahimsa is not easily provoked, for both anger and suspicion constitute murder. Ahimsa challenges the claim that life is divided into watertight compartments of rival creeds communities, races or even into divisions as human beings and animal creation, as if they were ordained to be perpetual warring factions. Gandhiji was trying to put Ahimsa into practice in the political field, for winning Swaraj for India.<sup>8</sup>



## **Gurukula**

Gurukula is another feature of modern Hindu ashrams which is the development of the Gurukula (Guru's family) ideal in education. The relationship between the teacher and the pupil was that of a father and child. The Gurukula expected the ordinary parents to transfer child's spiritual upbringing and education. At the Gurukula at Hardwar the terms of admission are that a boy enters the Gurukul when 6 years of age and does not leave it until he is 25. The teachers look after the temporal and spiritual welfare of the boys, with care and affection like parents.

At Shantiniketan the relation between the pupils and the teachers is most informal, free and easy. The boys stretch themselves under the trees when they are held in the open air. The ashram ideal in education was the development of personality and not imparting of instruction.<sup>9</sup>

## **Satyagraha Ashram. (Udyoga Mandir)**

Satyagraha Ashram was founded by Gandhiji on the 25<sup>th</sup> May 1915 at Kochrab, a small village near the city of Ahmedabad. The objective of this Ashram was that its members should qualify themselves for, and make a constant endeavor towards the service of the country, not inconsistent with universal good.

Gandhiji was a Gujarathi and felt that he would to render the greatest service to India through his own mother tongue. Ahmedabad was an ancient centre for handloom weaving, and it could provide a suitable field for reviving the cottage industry of hand spinning. He hoped some of the wealthy folks there would also help him financially.

The removal of untouchability has been from early boy-hood a very dear cause to Gandhiji. He made it clear to his friends, both outside sympathizers and members of the Ashram at the very outset that he would take the first opportunity to admit a so called untouchable candidate to the Ashram if he was otherwise satisfactory for admission. In giving a name to the Ashram he was anxious that the name should, as far as possible, convey some idea of the goal and method of attaining it.

While he was in South Africa, he realized at a meeting of Europeans the term 'Passive resistance' was narrowly construed. It was thought of as the method of the weak and it could end in hatred and ultimately break out into violence. He wanted a word to describe the real nature of the Indian movement. His nephew Maganlal Gandhi suggested the word 'Satyagraha' (*Sat* means *Truth* and *Agraha* means

*firmness*).<sup>40</sup> Pleased with this term which fitted well with his vision; Gandhiji adopted it and gave it as a name for his newly founded Ashram. Thus the principle was with him before the name was invented. For this ashram, its creed was to be devotion to its business to search for it and stick to it at all costs. So, truth was to be both the goal and the way.<sup>41</sup>

An ashram is in its very nature a place for self-discipline, self-discipline while one is wedded to a group in the service of one's fellow men must mean corporate or group discipline. This is not to be construed as a compulsion from without but rather as a compulsion from within for the greatest good of the greatest number. In group life one must observe the Pauline dictum 'All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient'. One must so live in a group that one's whole way of life and daily conduct conduce to the edifying of all.

Gandhiji felt that Ashram must lead the way and it could be done by the members of the ashram first learning how to discipline themselves both in their personal and corporate lives. In this ashram, enforcement of discipline and dealing with those who have done wrong, Gandhiji adopted the method of self-suffering by going into a fast himself.

The Ashram began at this village near Ahmedabad with twenty five members, both men and women, of whom thirteen were Tamils who had been with him in Africa. The place was lonely and provisions had to be obtained from the city four miles away. They had no buildings or trees on the spot. They were living under canvas and had only a tin-roofed shed as kitchen. Rains were approaching and they had many difficulties. Besides, the spot was infested with snakes. They would not kill any of them. But Gandhiji says that during the 25 years there had not been a single case of snake-bite. Gandhiji saw in it the great mercy of God and His protecting grace.

A weaving shed was erected and the principal activity was weaving. Khaddar (a locally homespun cloth) in Gandhiji's mind stands for a sacramental symbol of identification with the poor and a way of finding work for the millions of unemployed and starving villagers who are forced to remain idle during the non-rainy six months of the year when agricultural work stops.

Within a few months of the starting of the Ashram, there came an acid test to try the faithfulness of members to its ideals. An untouchable and his family applied for admission into the Ashram. Gandhiji was first perplexed but he shared the matter

with his comrades. They welcomed the proposal to admit the untouchables. The friends of the ashram became agitated. The owner of the rented house had part control over the well and the man in charge of the well began to grumble that he was being polluted. He swore at them and molested Dadhubai the wife of the 'untouchable' member. But Gandhiji advised everyone to patiently bear all the abuse but continue to draw water from the well at all costs. When the man saw that his abuse was only met by gentleness he became ashamed and did not trouble them anymore. But the friends who gave financial help stopped their contributions.

When it came to a time that they had no funds, God sent help at the last moment according to the Tamil proverbs which Gandhiji was fond of and always quoted: 'To the man who does not know where to turn, God alone is the help'.<sup>42</sup> Things brightened up and the fact that orthodox Hindus became friendly and the real supporters of the ashram contributing to its daily expenses shows that there was no scruple to help an Ashram where the caste people dine with untouchables.

After this, something more than the withdrawal of financial help hit Gandhiji. Rumors of social boycott filled the air. Gandhiji advised his comrades that, should the threat of social boycott mature, they would all go and live among the untouchables in their own locality and do manual labour and support themselves.

Gandhiji and his friends framed certain rules and observances for the Ashram which included humility. Gandhiji felt that humility could not be made a matter of vow, but could be born only out of self-effacement.<sup>43</sup> Delivery from 'self' was release—"moksha"—and if an aspirant after "moksha" had no humility about him he was really not a sincere seeker after Moksha or deliverance. Without humility even service becomes simply an expression of one's egoism.

It was tight in the Ashram work every day for all the members. Get up at 4 o'clock every morning for prayers at which attendance was taken. Prayers again in the evening at seven when everyone had got to give the number of yards of spun during the sacrificial hour. The whole plan seemed to be a great school for character.'

To Gandhiji the conception of Swaraj was the bringing in of the Kingdom of God into India. Speaking at the Muhammadan state of Bhopal he said Rana Raj is identical with "Deva Raj"—the Kingdom of God. Besides, Swaraj in his eyes stood for the 'Raj' (king) that would bring justice for the poor.<sup>44</sup> The Ashram was to be for the training of women for ushering in this Swaraj. The method by which they had to bring this about was by utter loyalty to the Truth, i.e., to Satyagraha.<sup>45</sup> He himself set

before them in his life how this principle of Satyagraha was to be understood and followed. Only those who believed in it as a life principle—a principle which is as harsh as Truth—could follow him and adopt it.

Before he established his ashram at Ahmedabad, his institution at Phoenix in South Africa was in all aspects already an ashram though the name ashram was not used. It was there where Gandhiji first worked out in practice the moral or rather spiritual method of Satyagraha in dealing with the difficult and trying situations into which the Indians there got owing to the hostile attitude of the European settlers there. By the terms 'Satyagraha', Gandhiji meant, "bid good-bye to fear".<sup>46</sup> True to his principle, Gandhiji was never afraid of trusting his opponent, even if that opponent had deceived him many times before.

A movement of Satyagraha can be carried on without material resources. A Satyagrahi's peacefulness self-restraint constitutes his preparation for war. He relies upon God as his sole refuge. Victory is in two qualities of non-violence and determination. Distress is a sign of weakness<sup>47</sup> and therefore Satyagraha implies the banishment of all weakness and therefore of distrust which is clearly out of place when the adversary is not to be destroyed but won over. A satyagrahi should never take advantage of an opponent's weak moments and exploit them for his advantage. Satyagrahi always lets his opponents know his course of action long before he takes it and does not do anything underhand.

Prayer formed an essential part of Satyagraha ashram. To Gandhiji, God and Truth are identical terms. In the midst of despair, this faith in God as the truth filled him with hope. The place of worship at this ashram was a simple plain open ground spread with river sand close by the Sabarnathi. Gandhiji would sit in front of it with children by his side, one of whom being a child he had adopted from the depressed class.

## **Essential Tenets of Satyagraha Ashram**

### Truth

Truth is God, the one and only Reality. All other observances take their rise from the quest for, and the worship of, Truth. Worshippers of Truth must not resort to untruth, even for what they believe to be the good of the country.

### Non-violence or Love

The active part of non-violence is Love. The law of Love requires equal consideration for all life from the tiniest insect to the highest man. One who follows this law must not be angry even with the perpetrator of the greatest imaginable wrong, but must love him, wish him well and serve him. He must thus love the wrong-doer, he must never submit to his wrong or his injustice, but must oppose it with all his might, and must patiently and without resentment suffer all the hardships to which the wrong-doer may subject him in punishment for his opposition.

### Chastity (Brahmacharya)

Observance of the foregoing principles is impossible without the observance of celibacy. It is not enough that one should not look upon any woman or man with a lustful eye; animal passion must be so controlled as to be excluded even from the mind. If married one must not have a carnal mind regarding one's wife or husband, but consider her or him as one's life-long friend, and establish relationship of perfect purity. A sinful touch, gesture or word is a direct breach of this principle.

### Control of the palate

The observance of Brahmacharyam has been found from experience, to be extremely difficult so long as one has not acquired mastery over taste. Control of the palate has therefore been placed as a principle by itself. Eating is necessary only for sustaining the body and keeping it a fit instrument for service, and must never be practiced for self-indulgence. Food must therefore be taken, like medicines under proper restraint. In pursuance of this principle one must eschew exciting foods, such as spices and condiments. Meat, liquor, tobacco, bhang etc. are excluded from the Ashram. This principle requires abstinence from feasts or dinners which have pleasure as their object.

### Non-stealing

Stealing is not only taking another's property without his permission but one becomes guilty of theft even by using differently anything which one has received in trust for use in a particular way as well as by using a thing longer than the period for which has been lent. It is also theft if one receives anything which one does not really need. The fine truth at bottom of this principle is that Nature provides enough and no more, for need.

### Non-possession or Poverty

One must not possess anything which he or she does not really need. It would be a breach of this principle to possess unnecessary foodstuffs, clothing, or furniture.

### Physical Labour

Man can be saved from injuring society, as well as himself, only if he sustains his physical existence by physical labour. Able-bodied adults should do all their personal work themselves, and may not be served by others, except for proper reason. But they should, at the same time, remember that service of children as well as of the disabled, the old and the sick, is a duty incumbent on every person who has the required strength.

### Swadeshi

Swadeshi is a principle in which one must, as far as possible, purchase one's requirement locally and not buy things imported from foreign countries which can easily be manufactured in the country. Observance of Swadeshi makes for order in the world; the breach of it leads to chaos. This principle is broken when one professes to serve those who are more remote in preference to those who are near.

### Fearlessness

One cannot follow Truth or Love so long as one is subject to fear in the country. A seeker after Truth must give up the fear of parents; caste, Government, robbers, etc., and he must not be frightened by poverty or death.

### Removal of Untouchability

Untouchability, which has taken such deep root in Hinduism, is altogether irreligious. The so-called untouchables are given equal place in the Ashram with other classes. The Ashram does not believe in caste which, it considers, has injured Hinduism, because its implications of superior and inferior status, and of pollution by contact are contrary to the law of Love. The Ashram however believes in varnashrama dharma. The division of varnas is based upon occupation, and therefore, a person should maintain himself by following the hereditary occupation, not inconsistent with fundamental morals, and should devote all his spare time and energy to the acquisition and advancement of true knowledge.

### Equality of Religion

The Ashram believes that the principal faiths of the world constitute a revelation of Truth, but that they have been affected by imperfections and alloyed with untruth. One must therefore entertain the same respect for the religious faiths of others as one accords to one's own. Where such attitude becomes a law of life, conflict between different faiths becomes impossible. One can only pray that the defects in the various faiths may be overcome, and that they may advance, side by side, towards perfection.

### Education

Education was one of the activities carried out at ashrams. For instance, Shantiniketan was one such ashram. Located a hundred miles from Calcutta, it was found by Maharishi Devadranath Tagore, during his religious pilgrimage to the area.

In 1901 his famous son Tagore founded a co-education Vidyalaya or school. The main object of this Vidyalaya Ashram was to impart spiritual culture to young people. At this ashram, education is imparted amidst the peace and beauty of nature. After morning prayer, the day's work begins. Classes are held from 7 am to 10 am and from 2 pm to 4pm. The meals are simple and the bachelor teachers dine with the boys. There is a part of the premises of Shantiniketan marked out as the Ashram and here Brahmachari (celibate) teachers alone live along with the boys and only strict vegetarian food is allowed.

The students go out to villages for rescue or relief work. They enforce the discipline of the school among themselves without being bossed upon by the teachers. They have games, outings, music, festivals and dramas. Music and art play a

prominent part. At night before retiring the students go round the dormitories singing suitable hymns. The school has grown into a Vishvabharathi or an Eastern University with the object of creating an 'institution which would be a true centre for all the cultures of the East, concentrating in one spot the varied ideals of-art and Civilization.

### **History of Christian Ashrams in India: A General Overview**

Christianity is one of the great and well known religions in world history. Its rise and spread has had and continues to have its impact on the entire world. Due to its simple teachings, on the one hand, and the missionary spirit of its followers, on the other hand, Christianity quickly became a world religion and got support in many countries of the world. Today Christianity is one of the most popularly accepted world religions and there is hardly any country in the world where Christians are not represented.<sup>48</sup>

### **Origins of Christianity**

Christianity began in the provincial backwaters of Palestine among the Jews, whose language, Aramaic, was understood by few in Rome. Tracing its roots to Judaism, Christianity is credited to Jesus of Nazareth as its founder who went about preaching His ideologies between 27AD and 31 AD. Though He was crucified by his own country men in the year 31 AD for what they felt was a conspiracy against Judaism, His movement, initially called by the masses as "the Way"(Acts 9:2)<sup>49</sup>, continues to this day under the new name with which it is known, Christianity.

This survival of the "Jesus movement" can be attributed to the followers Jesus left behind Him at the time of His death and ascension in A.D 31. Before He was condemned and killed, Jesus had organized his followers around a team of twelve disciples who later on came to be popularly known as apostles. Jesus, who was also known as the Christ, entrusted to these twelve men the role of leadership and spreading of his ideologies and visions to the entire world [Matthew 28:18-20].

### **Growth and Spread of Christianity**

Upon the death of their Master, with these disciples at the lead, the followers of Jesus began to spread their newly found religion to the surrounding towns and cities in Palestine starting with Jerusalem (Acts 1:8). From Palestine, Christianity



immediately spread to neighboring non-Jewish nations around and beyond Palestine. Of historic importance to Christianity is the city of Antioch from where the followers of Jesus were for the first time given the name “Christians”<sup>50</sup> otherwise, hitherto they had no formal name to identify them with apart from being called those of “the Way” as it was earlier pointed out.

One of these core disciples, cum apostles, of Jesus, known as Thomas, also called Didymus, (John 11:16)<sup>51</sup> is alleged by tradition to have been the one who came to spread Christianity to India in the year 52 A.D. He is thus regarded by most scholars and historians as the first person who planted the seeds of Christianity in India. His entry point into India was Cranganoe in Cochin, Kerala in South India.<sup>52</sup>

The Christian traditions in India claim that Thomas who is fondly known as Saint Thomas, founded at least seven churches before his untimely death at the hands of the Hindus. These churches are Maliankara, Palayur, Parur, Gokamangalam, Niranam, Chayal and Quilon<sup>53</sup>. Since Saint Thomas came to India from Syria of Antiochea the people who converted to Christianity in response to his efforts in India identified themselves with the Syrian tradition of Christianity and consequently called themselves Syrian Christians<sup>54</sup>. These churches which Saint Thomas founded were in turn responsible for the spread, growth and development of Christianity in India.

Later on in the 16<sup>th</sup> through the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D, European Christian missionaries following the explorations and discoveries of such explorers like Vasco da Gama of Spain who discovered India in 1498 flooded into India with various evangelistic missions to spread and establish Christian church missions in India.<sup>55</sup> Notable among these Christian missionaries who came to spread Christianity in India were people like Francis Xavier, Robert de Nobille, Henrich Plutschchau, Bartholomew Ziegenbalg, William Carey and others.<sup>56</sup> Despite many challenges and difficulties include adverse climate conditions that these Christian missionaries encountered, it is largely due to their efforts that Christianity grew in India.

### **Arrival of Christian Ashrams in India**

Christian Ashrams arrived late (in the 1920s) on the Indian scene. Historically these Christian ashrams in India fall under two traditions, the Roman Catholic ashrams, that is—those founded and run by the Roman Catholic Church and those founded and run by Protestant churches. The first Christian ashram to be established

in India was founded at Tirupattur in the State of Tamil Nadu in 1921 by the Protestants while the first Catholic ashram was founded in the year 1950 at Shantivanam, near Kulittalai in Tamil Nadu.

The history of the origins of these Christian ashrams in India suggests that these institutions of spiritual and cultural learning were born out of necessity following the stalemate situation in which Christian missions found themselves in the face of the resistant Hindus of India. Besides climate and other factors militating against the missionaries, the missionaries' own negative attitudes and perceptions towards, and of, Indigenous Indians, who were mostly Hindus and, to the missionaries, appeared idolatrous, was the greatest impinging obstacle to the spread of Christianity which needed to be overcome if Christian missions were to succeed.

The first missionaries (especially the Roman Catholic missionaries) were men who saw nothing but evil in Hinduism and looked upon Hindus as people who were debased and corrupt<sup>57</sup>. Thus wrote Francis Xavier, one of the highly regarded Roman Catholic Missionaries to India, to his chief, Ignatius Loyola, in one of his letters: "The whole race of Hindus is barbarous and will listen to nothing that does not suit its barbarous customs. Regarding the knowledge of what is God-like and virtuous it cares but little". Since his time there have been others, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, who have in a measure shared with him the same attitude towards the religion and people of India.

Protestant missionaries, just like their Roman Catholic counterparts, did to some extent also err in this hostile attitude towards Hindus. Harmless Indian habits and even Indian music were condemned and labeled as 'heathen'. Such negative attitudes and poor relationships between the Christian missionaries and the local Hindus slowed the growth of Christianity for a considerable long time. It was not until this mistake was realized later on by later missionaries who consequently took the initiative to narrow the gap and improve their relations with the indigenous people that the situation somehow improved.

This significant change came with men like Farquhar who began to take the attitude that Christianity was the crown of Hinduism. And following this shift in attitudes towards the Hindus and as a set off to the same, some people suggested that Christian missions was neither to condemn nor to adopt Hinduism in any way, but was to be satisfied with the mere preaching of Christ and His cross.<sup>58</sup>

Significant though this shift was, a major change in Christians towards Hindu attitude came in about 1606 with Robert de Nobile and other Jesuits of a high intellectual order, ability, culture and sacrifice, who Indianised themselves and their methods of Christian work to the point that they incurred papal condemnation. They went about dressed in the yellow garb of Hindu Sanyasis wearing wooden sandals and carrying the 'Yoga-Nanda' (the meditation staff of Hindu ascetics) and even wearing the sacred thread like Brahmins.<sup>59</sup>

The famous Father de Nobile was one of them. His successor, Father Beschi, who is better known among Indian Roman Catholics by name 'Veerarnahamuni,' adopted even more radical methods. Beschi was thorough in his study of Tamil and became a great scholar in the language. It is even said that he used to shut himself for early morning until forenoon in a little village hut where he lived for the sake of language study. He composed a book called *Thembhavani*, a Tamil poetical work considered by Tamil scholars as a masterpiece of Tamil literature.

That this attempt at identification with the people was a success is at least, proven by the increasing numbers of converts from Hindus into Christianity during this period. It is alleged that "[b]y the end of 1609 Roberto had gathered around him some sixty new converts, including a few Brahmins."<sup>60</sup>

It is against this backdrop of a quest for a strategy that could help the Christian missionaries to reach out to the Hindu minds that the idea of Christian ashrams in India was conceived and born. Thus history suggests that Christian ashrams began at a more recent period, when some Christians, both missionaries and Indians in India, wanted to overcome the obstacles which were preventing the conversion of the indigenous people of India who looked upon Christianity not only as a foreign religion but an invasion and conspiracy against their Hindu cultural heritage. This problem was compounded by the fact of the political domination of the 'Christian' nations of the West over the East as David J. Bosch observes.<sup>61</sup>

These two factors, partly racial and partly political, created problems which set some Christian men and women in India on thinking about the best approaches that could be used by Christians to witness to their Hindu neighbors and consequently moved them to creation of various strategies of which the idea of Christian ashrams is one. Though such is the history regarding the origins of Christian ashrams in India, it would be wrong to suppose that the Christian ashram is a mere strategy of outreach by

Christian missionaries as some critics think. Christian ashrams are more than mere evangelistic tools and strategies as this enquiry will demonstrate.

The members of Christian ashrams have adopted a simple mode of life and service because they are convicted that it is only right and proper to do so. J. Hoyland in his book, *The Cross Moves the East*, observes that when St. John, one of the authors of the Christian Scriptures in the New Testament of the Bible, and a disciple of Jesus Christ himself, used the expression “logos” a Greek term which means “word”, for Christ, he used it not because he thought it a good missionary method or it was politic to do so but because he himself felt that the word conveyed a meaning that fitted in with his own mental picture of Jesus Christ.<sup>62</sup> Those who believe in the Christian ashram ideal do so because that ideal is best suited to the way of life, service and witnessing to which they feel called by God.<sup>63</sup> Of course this ideal is at times modified and adapted to fit in with the changing environments and times these ashramites find themselves in.

### **The Role of Early Christian monasticism on the Establishment of Indian Christian Ashrams**

The concept of ashrams and asceticism, though often viewed as an Eastern brainchild and practice, and is more identified with religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and other religions of India, is not an entirely foreign idea to Christianity.<sup>64</sup> This could not be surprising considering that Christianity emerged out of Judaism which history indicates also practiced similar concepts as Hinduism and the other Eastern religions.<sup>65</sup> Whether this was due to the influence of these other religions on Judaism or Judaism’s own initiative remains a debatable point<sup>66</sup>. However, what is significant for this discussion is the fact that some sects in Judaism practiced something close to the Hindu or Buddhist ashram.

Though it cannot be argued with certainty that these Jewish monasteries or forms of ashrams were the origins of the later Christian ashrams in India, it is significant to observe that they formed a basis upon which Christians built their philosophy and theology of monasteries. Historically, Christian monasticism emerged in Egypt in the last decades of the third century, though, as noted, the forces that combined to produce monasticism are ancient and universal. The practice of rigorous self-denial was common to several religious and philosophical sects in antiquity—for example, the Pythagoreans and the Stoics—who were well known among the Jews in

the time of Christ, as the Essenes show. Widespread opinion held that if one could conquer the desires of the body, one could unite with those beings who were greater and purer than a humanity encumbered by its lusts for food, drink, knowledge, sex, and adventure.

These traditions were in the person of Anthony. In Egypt he was a man who, at about age 20, gave away all his possessions and took up in the Egyptian desert a life of prayer and renunciation. In the desert, Anthony sought to imitate the life of Christ. His spiritual quest became famous, and many disciples flocked to him. Finally, he decided to organize them into a very loose community. Anthony's form of monasticism is called eremitic, from the Greek *heremos* for 'desert.' The name eremitic, signifying extreme asceticism and individualism, gives us the word hermit.<sup>67</sup>

Pachomius (290—346) created a second form of monastic life. He was a Roman soldier who left the service in 313, was baptized a Christian, and retired to the Egyptian desert, where he studied with a hermit. Eventually Pachomius founded a community of ascetics, and before long his community, and dozens like it, had thousands of members. Literally thousands of people were living alone but together in veritable cities out in the desert. Pachomius, just wrote the first Rule, or code for daily living, for a monastic community. He organized most aspects of the life of his community by designing a common life based on routines of private prayer, group worship, and work. Pachomius's pattern of monasticism is called coenobitic, from the Greek for 'common life.' The persons living this common life were called monks, and the place where they lived this life was called a monastery. The head of the community was designated abbot, a word meaning 'father.'

From Egypt, monasticism spread to other parts of the world by means of texts such as *the Life of Anthony*, collections of the wise sayings of famous desert abbots, and books written by persons who went to Egypt seeking a more perfect life—among whom were several prominent women, such as Melania. The appeal of monasticism grew greater after Christianity gained official status. Those who were attracted to monasticism saw it as a purer form of Christian life, uncorrupted by the wealth, power, and controversy of the hierarchical church. The ascetic life was popular with women for personal reasons and because offices in the church hierarchy were denied to women. Positions in monasteries, including that of abbess, provided outlets for female talent.

As monasticism spread from Egypt, it adopted the two basic patterns. To the East, the eremitic pattern was prominent in Palestine and Syria and eventually throughout the Greek-speaking world. Eastern monasticism produced a great legislator in Basil (330—379), who wrote the most influential Rule in the Orthodox Church. Generally, these monks assembled only for weekly worship and otherwise ate, prayed, and worked alone.

Eremitic monasticism arrived in the West in the person of Martin of Tours (336—397). Like Pachomius, Martin was a pagan Roman soldier who, after his military service ended, embraced both Christianity and asceticism. Even though he was elected bishop of Tours, Martin kept to his rigid life of denial. An admiring biography kept Martin's memory alive for centuries, but in the West the coenobitic pattern proved more successful than the eremitic. The first great center from which coenobitic monasticism spread was Lérins in the south of Gaul, where a community was founded in 410. The fame of Lérins spread rapidly throughout the Western Roman Empire, and men came to it from all over. Lérins attracted many aristocrats, some of whom went on to become bishops and promoters of monasticism.

The most famous monastic founder in the West was Benedict of Nursia (480—545), a middle-class Roman who abandoned legal studies and a potential government career to pursue a life of prayer. Benedict's fame grew so great that he attracted a crowd of followers, and in about 520, at Monte Cassino—80 miles south of Rome, he drew up a Rule. This Rule was marked by shrewd insights into the human personality. It emphasizes the bond of mutual love among the monks and obedience to the abbot.<sup>68</sup>

Growing amidst such environments, Christianity thus drew much of its theologies of monasteries and ascetism from these pagan and Jewish forerunners though its fundamental inspiration remains and has been its Holy Scriptures, the Bible. As Anatole G Mazour and John M. Peoples write “monks and nuns believed that one of the best ways to live a perfect Christian life was to withdraw from the world and its temptations and serve God through prayer, fasting, and self denial.”<sup>69</sup> Initially “each monk lived alone” however later these monks began to live together in one place called a “monastery” while nuns lived in “convents”.<sup>70</sup> Thus, as pointed out, it is from these forerunners that Christianity got its inspiration from on the development of Christian ashrams.

### **Quest for Catholicity an impetus for Christian ashrams**

As the Christian church grew and became established with a well defined hierarchy which attracted the finest intellectuals into its ranks, a desire to universalize its traditions and practices arose. It was widely recognized that until a standard set of Christian sources was defined, there could be no hope of uniformity of Christian belief. This process was not completed until the middle of the fifth century.

However, this quest for uniformity in practice was not received favorably with new converts in other parts of Christendom especially India where the newly converted Indian Christians felt the need to preserve their cultural heritage and traditions and practice Christianity in their own traditions which would include their own Indian way of worship and doing other things. It is partly the resultant conflict between the Indian Christians and the European Christian missionaries coupled with the already existing resistance of prospective converts among Hindus and Buddhists that began to sow seeds of the need for Christian ashrams as Christian missionaries began to search for means of lifting the barrier they faced in reaching out to the people of India.

### **Life at the Ashram**

Christian ashrams constitute Group Movements, Fellowships of a close-knit groups bound by the presence of the Holy Spirit with no boundaries of class, race, age, sex. A churchashram in India is a place where liturgy (a form of community worship usually related to the church) is closely related to the Indian cultural tradition and a theology lived and pondered in the context of the Indian Spiritual Tradition<sup>71</sup>.

An ashram is both an outcome of life just as it is also a source of life. Religion is not a part of life but a life itself and for this reason it is possible in the ashram to adapt oneself wholly to all circumstances because it is as supple as life itself. Hence, in a classical sense, ashrams may not be considered as just religious institutes for monarchs have learned there to love their people and were schooled in diplomacy. Thus, ashrams are 'spiritual power-houses' for the experiments of life.<sup>72</sup>

### **History of Christian Ashrams in India: A critical comparison of Hindu and Christian Ashrams**

Ashrams have existed in India for almost three thousand years, but there were no Christian ashrams until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The reason for this is possible prejudice on the side of both the Christian missionaries who were too indifferent to adopt the Indian culture and lifestyle on the one hand, and the indigenous Indian peoples who also were not ready to adopt anything foreign to their culture.

Though the first Christian ashram was not established until 1921 by the Protestants, the idea of establishing Christian ashrams in India, however, was first proposed by K.T Paul, then the General Secretary of the National Missionary Society (NMS) in 1912 in Delhi. By 1927 a second Christian ashram, “the Christian Prema Seva Ashram”, was founded in Pune, Maharashtra, by the Anglican Father Jack Winslow, who still remains an inspiration among Christians due to his profound convictions that the Gospel can and should be lived in terms of any culture. Father Jack Winslow was deeply concerned over the socio-cultural alienation suffered by Hindus who became Christians in Pune, Maharashtra.

It took almost thirty years before a second Christian Ashram was founded by the Roman Catholics at Shantivanam Ashram, Trichy in Tamil Nadu. This was the first Catholic Ashram of its kind and was founded by Father J. Mochanin and Father H. Le Saux in 1950. Its focus was on “inculturation” of the Gospel and of Benedictine life, with special attention to the liturgy and the development of truly Indian theology.<sup>73</sup>

The Ashrams were established with different purposes. Although conversion was still an issue, the more compelling reason was the need to break away from the western mode of Christianity to make Christianity more Indian in its practice. Thus Christian ashrams were in a way, a step towards the indigenization of the Kingdom of God because of its congruence with Indian culture and traditions as opposed to the Western concept of the Church which was foreign to the people of India.

In 1930 E. Stanley Jones formed a group for discipline in the Christian Community which consequently led to the establishment of a movement for the founding and establishment of Christian ashrams. The group was convinced that the Hindus were redeemable and that adopting the concept of ashrams would be the best strategy to reach them easily with the Christian message and consequently win them over to Christianity. Thus this movement became instrumental and a critical tool in reaching the Hindu people. Convinced this way, the group adopted the ashram concept



and made it Christian—even to the extent of using the name ashram for their own monasteries.

Ashrams have grown rapidly down the centuries, and it is hard to guess as to their present number. There are operating Ashrams and non-operating ashrams, ashrams that are neither dead nor alive, and those which are terminally sick Ashrams. There are those ashrams which are flourishing and draw thousands of pilgrims every year, often in family groups, and provide them with inspiration and energy to carry on the daily struggle for existence. There are also new ashrams, some large and ostentatious and still others, small and hidden. Among these latter are a number of recent Christian ashrams not known as yet beyond their immediate surroundings. This research is an attempt to provide a history of Christian Ashrams in two states viz., Tamil Nadu and Kerala in India.

An ashram remains essentially a place where a holy rishi in any manner retires to meditate and pray. And it is at this place where a group of disciples gather round a rishi to share his meditation and his experience of God. Christian ashrams are based upon three important factors namely, spirituality, community, and for teaching of values in life. Historically, though, Christian ashrams fall under two major traditions. There are ashrams run by the Roman Catholic Church and subsequently follow the Catholic tradition of practice and there are those established and run by Protestant churches, which likewise follow Protestant traditions.

While essentially all Christian ashrams are similar in practice, some significant differences exist between Catholic and Protestant ashrams. Catholic ashrams are essentially a community life based on shared prayer and a common rule of life. They are institutionalized and established by a competent authority. Protestant ashrams on the other hand, are less structured and have a spontaneous way of life.

In contrast with Christian ashrams, Hindu ashrams have both aspects in their practice. Whereas Christian ashrams do not have an individual they look to as of prime importance as their master and for guidance in the experience of God in the ashram, in a Hindu ashram the Guru is all important, as everything centres on his particular experience of God. For Christians, Jesus Christ is in a sense their Guru. Though not physically present on earth, he is considered as the head of the ashram just as he is the head and Savior of the church and the entire human race.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, while in a Hindu ashram the primary relationship is between the disciple and the

Guru, in a Christian ashram the relationship of the members with one another as members of the one body of Christ, is central.<sup>75</sup>

Silent meditation is fundamental to the experience of God in a Hindu Ashram. Though similar importance is given to silence, in a Christian ashram an apparent difference exists between the two traditions in the theological signification they attach to this silence. Further, a Hindu ashram life strives to create a delicate balance between the demands of solitude and personal prayer and the demands of community life common prayer while a Christian ashram life as whole is essentially a communion, in the Body of Christ, which is the distinctive mark of Christian prayer.

Whereas Christian religious houses are usually modeled on western lines and follow a western style of life, Hindu ashrams on the other hand, always follow an Indian lifestyle. A Hindu Ashram for instance, normally begins with a sanyasi (a holy man who studies and meditates for years before he renounces the world<sup>76</sup>) who lives in absolute simplicity, often having just two clothes to cover himself with and living in a simple hut which is not the case with a Christian ashram which though also uses the term sanyasi which they adopted from the Hindus does not normally begin with such an individual.

Of fundamental value to a genuine Hindu ashram is simplicity which characterizes everything carried out at the place and its inhabitants. Though adaptations can be made and are permissible in respect of varied to circumstances and situations, at the core a Hindu ashram tenaciously holds to simplicity in everything and follows a traditional Hindu lifestyle. For instance, almost all Hindu ashrams still retain the traditional Indian posture of sitting on the floor for prayer and meals. Nevertheless, modern Hindu ashrams have also adopted many elements which are western in origin.

Ashram life centers on prayer and meditation and is oriented toward contemplation in all its activities, but it is nonetheless open to different kinds of work. Karma Yoga together with Bhakti and jnana are normal activities of a Hindu ashram. This takes the form of work in the house or the garden or of literary or artistic kind.

There is also a tradition in Hindu ashrams today of social activities. Social activity in ashrams was inspired by the example of Gandhiji and by the Ramakrishna Order. Christian ashrams are naturally inclined to work of this kind.

An ashram with its simple style of life, on the village level is an ideal setting for social service of every kind today. Though as pointed out earlier, an ashram does

not exist primarily for social service or for any other purpose than ‘experience of God’ the need for this is the community today cannot just be ignored. The world today is preoccupied with the problem of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition and the need for service of this kind is overwhelming. While it is true that human beings “shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God”,<sup>77</sup> it is equally unarguable that mankind’s social and physical needs cannot safely be overlooked for too long. Hence, many ashrams, awakening to the reality of this truth also participate in social activities and charity works in their territories.

However, this is not their main call. Their primary duty, in the case of Christian ashrams is to communicate and model the life of search for God and the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, living its true values to the world or practicing what in Hinduism is called Brahmavidya and Atmavidya. In this respect a Christian ashram forms an essential link between the Christian and the Hindu. Both can work together in the search for a new way for the growth and development of the country towards humanitarian cause.

A closer examination and analysis of the history both of the Hindu and Christian ashrams in regards to their original ideals and objectives at the times of their earliest inceptions compared to the 21<sup>st</sup> century ashrams of the same traditions reveals a departure in spirit and practice of these traditions from their original ideals and virtues. Earlier Christian ashrams were attractive to the public due to virtues which they represented and promoted such as simplicity of life, spirituality, truth, love, brotherhood and spiritual order. Now-a-days the Christian ashrams are quite different than what they were.

Thus there is need for these Christian and Hindu ashrams to review their values and return to their original foundational values. For instance, Hindu ashrams would do well to go back to virtues and ideals of life as portrayed in the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, by the Bhakti saints and poets and of their religion. There is need to recover the ancient simplicity of life and dedication to humble work, and open the door to the needs of the villages.

Equally, Christian ashrams would do well to return to the exemplary lives of the founding missionaries of these ashrams like Robert de Nobile and the others who really lived the virtuous lives they preached to the people. More than talking and theoretical preaching to the masses, there is need in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for Christian ashrams to walk the talk and emulate the example of their Master and founder of their

religion, Jesus Christ who showed immense interest in the poor and always sought to address their physical, spiritual and social needs<sup>78</sup>.

An ashram while consisting of a core of dedicated men and women ought to be open to all corners, men and women, rich and poor, Hindu and Christian and any seekers of God. All this must be an integral element in the continual search to 'realize' God, to discover the depths of the divine mystery.

#### Reasons for starting Christian Ashrams

There are three major reasons why Christian ashrams in India were started. These are as follows:

1. Indigenization. Christian Ashrams were set up more to indigenize the church than for evangelical purposes.
2. A desire to demonstrate equality in simplicity and service between Europeans and Indians, and a desire to give an Indian presentation of Christian life and worship.
3. Spiritual purposes. Detachment from the world, meditation/spirituality and evangelism.

#### Indigenization as Strategy of Christian Missions in India

In 1928 a Christian ecumenical council was held in Jerusalem where a number of missiological issues regarding Christian world missions and other relevant issues to the Christian communities were discussed. One important agenda discussed at this meeting was the question of the relations between Christianity and other religions. At this conference the idea of indigenization of the Christian message was given central preeminence.

Since this Jerusalem conference, the concept of ashrams in India has been looked upon as a hopeful strategy to indigenize Christianity in India and the door to reaching out to the people of India. Coupled with the fact that the idea of running the Christian church in India in the traditions and styles of the Western cultures so appalled some Indian Christians and kept off potential converts from accepting Christianity, Christian churches turned to adopt the Indian ashram pattern of doing missions as a way of both identifying with the indigenous people and indigenizing the gospel. Thus Indian Christians who were very concerned about their own involvement in mission in their own country also largely contributed to the

founding of Christian Ashrams.

The earliest mention of ashrams by non-Catholic Christians comes from a meeting of the National Missionary Society (NMS) held a meeting in Delhi in April 1912 and discussed about the formation of Christian Ashrams. Many of these members were to some extent Indian nationalists who wanted to engage in missions independent of the foreign missionary societies. The foreign missionary societies brought many foreign assumption, practices and ideologies which the local did not like much. Intensifying the situation was the contemporary political climate which perceived foreigners on Indian soil as invaders and conspirators of the Indian cultural heritage.

For instance, in its 1921 “resolutions” the All-India Conference of Indian Christians explicitly says, “the Indian Church like the Indian nation should be liberated from foreign rule.”<sup>79</sup> With this desire to become independent rampant in the nation, Indian Christians, too began to advocate and press for independence in running their churches.

K.T. Paul, then the General Secretary of the NMS is known as the first person who suggested the establishment of Christian ashrams patterned after the Indian life style and culture. The vision was to establish Christian ashrams which would be attractive to Christian youths and which would meet their spiritual needs and where they could be trained in.

However, it was Narayan Vaman Tilak, considered by many people as one of the greatest Maharashtrian Christian poet, who may be considered to be the first person to translate this idea into reality by founding a first Christian organization which he called “God’s Darbar”[God’s Court of residence] in 1917 and often explicitly described it as an “ashram.” This may suggest that in Tilak’s view an ashram is a place where God’s presence is always available. It is his dwelling place. According to Sita Ram Goel, author of *Catholic Ashrams*, Tilak “had a vision of Christ founding Swaraj[“self-government”, “self rule” or “home-rule”] in man’s heart”.<sup>80</sup> He equated this with the Kingdom of God. This is what led him to start this organization which was based in Satara<sup>81</sup>.

Tilak spoke of Jesus Christ as the guru of the ashram while Tilak, its head, was the chief servant. Though he was opposed by many Christians and missionaries and his institution failed following his death, Tilak’s christening of his organization

as “ashram” may be considered as a significant historic event in the history of Christianity in India particularly the birth of Christian ashrams.

Another significant step in the history of Christian ashrams in India came about in 1920 when G.S. Duraiswamy, in an article in *“The Harvest Field”*, suggested that a series of ashrams were to be founded as “theological institutions—for thinking, training, study, research and writing”.<sup>82</sup> But this brought harsh criticism and censure upon him from a number of foreign missionaries “from the point of view of economics and theology.”<sup>83</sup>

In 1921 Christukula Ashram was founded in Tirupattur 140 miles south west of Madras by Dr. S. Jesudason and Dr. E Forrester Paton. They were officially members of NMS missionaries. As noted elsewhere in this paper, Christukula thus became the first major protestant Ashram. The Ashram was Gandhian in style. Vegetarian food was served to members of the Ashram. Celibacy was the rule and the membership was male, although some women school teachers did stay there and married men sometimes came for periods of time. All the work was done by the members; there were few if any servants. A long day with fixed hours for work, study and worship was kept.

The major social service activity of the Ashram was medical care. Village evangelism was also a high priority with Ashram and education and agricultural development were systematically offered.

Christukula Ashram was very effective in mission. Many in nearby villages were taught and healed. Many who came to stay for a while were deeply touched. Gandhi visited though he did not visit many Christian institutions. The Ashramites were admired and respected by their neighbors. Other Ashrams were modeled on it. Several different churches testified about the personal importance of their stay there. This ashram’s contribution to Tamil-style church architecture was outstanding, and contributed to Tamil Christian lyrics.

Things are not well with the second generation which runs the Ashram. Though useful things are done, they are not as it were. Ashrams are leader-centered rather than institution-centered.

The first Catholic ashram was founded by Brahmachari Rewachand Animananda, also known as Swami Animananda, in Ranchi around 1940.

Abbé Jules Monchanin, a French priest was interested in Brahmabandhab and Indian religious style consequently he adopted the name Swami Parama Arubi

Anandam through the influence of Bhakti Ashram. In 1945 he called his presbytery at Kulittalai, Tamil Nadu to discuss the idea of establishing Christian ashrams in the region. Following this interest in the Indian culture and spirituality, Monchanin, in 1950, with Abhishiktananda (Dom Henri Le Saux), a French Benedictine, founded the Saccidananda Ashram at Shantivanam on the Kaveri river, near Kulittalai. This consequently became the first major Catholic ashram. The founders were very learned, very sympathetic to the best in Hindu spirituality, and deeply influenced by Brahmabandhab and by Ramana Maharisi, one of the really great Hindu saints of South India at that time. They adopted Hindu life style. They worshipped and even ate like Hindus.

Nevertheless, the Ashram did not work out because the missionaries were too Benedictine. Though they had expressed interest in the local culture and tradition, they failed to assimilate enough to let their western mentalities and attitudes go. Since Western monasticism and the style of an Indian Ashram could not mix they thus had spelled out their own doom.

When these two missionaries left, Dom Bede Griffiths came to Shantivanam to make lay a new foundation. Don Bede had been in India for many years at the so-called Ashram in Kurisumala where he must have observed how to do and how not to do things under his leadership.

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- <sup>3</sup> Robert Van De Weyer, *Guru Jesus*, (London: SPCK, 1975), p107.
- <sup>4</sup> J.C., WINSLOW. Narayan Vaman Tilak — The Christian Poet of Maharashtra, (Calcutta: Association Press, 1923), pp. 124
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- <sup>8</sup> Savarirayan, Jesudason. *Ashrams Ancient and Modern*. (Vellore: Ramachandra Press, 1937), pp.4.
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- <sup>10</sup> Barbara, Norean. *Crossroads of the Spirit*, (New Delhi: ISPCK Publishers, 1994), pp.19.
- <sup>11</sup> Often the founders of Ashrams keep long beards as it can be seen from available photos of ancient and even modern founders. A visit to any ashram will reveal that many disciples there do not keep long beards as their masters do.
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- <sup>18</sup> Sara Grant, “The Synod on Consecrated Life and the Ashram Tradition”, *Vidyajyothi Journal of Theological Reflection* 58(7), July 1994:435-450
- <sup>19</sup> Many scholars agree that it was St. Thomas who first brought the Christianity to India. See for example, KM George, *Christian in India Through the Centuries* (Hyderabad: Authentic Books, 2007) and C.B. Firth, *An Introduction to India Church History* (Delhi: The Senate of Serempore College, ISPCK Books, revised 1976, 2003 reprint).
- <sup>20</sup> Savarirayan Jesudason, “The Indian Church and Community Life”, *The Indian Journal of Theology*, October-December, 1958
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- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.8
- <sup>26</sup> The researcher relied on... for the information found in this section
- <sup>27</sup> Ashrams should not be confused with the four ashramas or stages of a man's life, as Brahmacharya, Grahasta, Vanaprastha and Sanyasa. The first are institutions where principles of life were taught and exemplified while the latter are the actual different stages of this life characterized by specific activities unique to each particular stage of life.
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- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.2
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Jones Stanley, *Christian Ashram Movement Newsletter*(February 4, 2009)
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- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid,5
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid,4.
- <sup>36</sup> Sanivarapu Chinnappa, *Ashram Life, Its Relevance and Mission* (Cuddapah: Master Printers, 1992), p.15.
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- <sup>48</sup> R. K Majumdar, *History of World Civilization* (Delhi: Surjeet Book Depot, 1981) , p.155
- <sup>49</sup> New Testament. Acts 9:2
- <sup>50</sup> New Testament. Acts 11:26
- <sup>51</sup> New Testament. John 11:16.
- <sup>52</sup> A. Mathias Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India, From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1984),Vol. 1, pp.25
- <sup>53</sup> Firth, pp.3.
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**CHAPTER 2**

**REVIEW OF RELATED**

**LITERATURE**

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A consensus seems to prevail among scholars regarding the origins of Christian ashrams in India. Nationalism, evangelism and a search for a deeper experience of God were the three main factors behind the birth of Christian ashrams in India. This literature review assesses works available on the origins of Christian ashrams in India. It documents starts with the arrival of Christianity in India and traces its effect on the Indian people and the challenges it encountered to the birth of Christian ashrams on the Indian soil.

Though it seems easy to discuss an ashram, it would appear that its definition is elusive to many scholars. Michael O' Toole, author of *Christian Ashrams in India* observes that it is not easy to precisely define what an ashram is due to different opinions different people hold in regards to these institutions<sup>1</sup>. He thus signals that there is a conflict among intellectuals if not an outright confusion on what the concept of ashram represents. This possibly is reflective of the ignorance people generally have of what actually happens at these institutions, including ignorance on the history of their origins and their motives.

Swami Sahajananda's article 'The Essence of Ashram Life' traces the meaning of the term ashram down to its etymological roots. In his discovery, he reveals that the word "ashram" is an amalgamation of two Sanskrit words namely "shram," which means "hard work, struggle, and conflict"; and the prepositional particle "a" which is a negation of the term that follows it. Thus "a-shram", which he argues is the "essence of ashram life"<sup>2</sup>, means "no hard work, no struggle, no conflict, no burden, and no labouring." In other words, according to Sahajananda,

Ashram life is a life where there is no effort to achieve something. It is a life of inner freedom, spontaneity and effortless life. It is neither a life of freedom in the sense that there is desire to get anything more nor fear of losing something<sup>3</sup>.

In the words of Savirirayan Jesudason an ashram is "in its very nature a place for self-discipline" where this means "corporate or group discipline."<sup>4</sup> While this

description of an ashram may be correct in reference to a typical Hindu ashram, it seems somewhat different from the conception Christians hold of their ashram. Almost all Christian ashrams in India are founded on the emulation of the principles of the founder of their religion, Jesus Christ. Embedded in the speech which he made one day when he visited the synagogue in Nazareth, Palestine, Jesus declared that his vision was “to proclaim good news to the poor... freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,” and “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”<sup>5</sup> This in turn has turned out to be the central motif in the establishment of Christian ashrams in India. For instance, the constitution of the Christu Kula Ashram in Tirupattur explicitly identifies itself with this charter of Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

However, what is of significance in both Sahajananda’s and O’ Toole’s discourses respectively, is the observation of the fact that the idea of ashrams in India, however conceived, has its roots in Hinduism<sup>7</sup>. In this conclusion thus the authors are representative of many other scholars sharing the same position on the subject.

In this book Toole further observes that there are two categories of Christian ashrams in India. There are those that are called as “Devotional Ashrams” and those that are known as “Service Ashrams.” Each of these categories identifies itself with a distinctive ideology that marks it out as different from the other. For instance, the Devotional Ashrams follow the discipline of Bhakti while the Service Ashrams follow the Karma Yoga<sup>8</sup>.

While Toole’s observation is right, there seems good reason to argue that it is not entirely correct when it comes to the impetus that drove Christian ashrams into existence in India. For instance, Thomas F. X. Noble, et al., in *Western Civilization: Beyond Boundaries: Volume 1: To 1715*, show that the idea of asceticism and a life of seclusion for religious purposes was not absent both in Christianity, in its very early inceptive days and, Judaism, respectively<sup>9</sup>. In this observation the authors of this work are not alone. Henry Chadwick in his book, *The Early Church* (Penguin), also makes similar observations<sup>10</sup>.

The Ashram is one of the few relics of the ancient Indian world which has stood the test of ages. Savarirayan Jesudason, author of *Ashrams, Ancient and Modern*, persuasively argues that the fact that the concept of ashrams has survived the ages while many other institutions and creations of the past have long died out on the Indian scene bespeaks loudly of their “usefulness” to the Indian people.<sup>11</sup>

The continued relevance to modern times of the ashrams, the author argues, is demonstrated in the institutions, movements and various organs in the nation which they have inspired and continue to do so.<sup>12</sup> On this basis, namely their ability to inspire society towards progress and development, the author strongly believes that ashrams need to continue and even more need to be established in India for the Indian people to realize more of their potential through the influences of the ashrams. Though he does not need to be correct, the author thinks that “Colleges and Churches cannot produce the men [India needs]. Councils and legislators cannot make us [Indians] better men.”<sup>13</sup> It is his conviction that only ashrams can do that.<sup>14</sup>

Tracing the history of the introduction of Christianity into India and the influence of Christian traders and the role commerce played, from A.D 52, M. K Kuriakose in his *History of Christianity in India: Source Material* joins many other historians to echo the argument that Christianity was introduced into India by one of the disciples cum apostles of Jesus Christ, known by the name of Thomas. Of significance is his chronicling of the role the political wind of change that characterized India in the 1920s played on the Indian Christians in influencing their attitudes towards the foreign missionaries who had mentored them and flaming the desire towards self rule as a Church.<sup>15</sup>

Helen Ralston, *Christian Ashrams: A New Religious Movement in Contemporary India*, while acknowledging the generally accepted tradition that the first Christian Ashram in India was *Christukula* in 1921, argues that that is a mistaken belief. According to him Bethany ashram which was founded in the then Ranni-Perunad district but now known as Kerala, in 1918 by P.T Geevarghese, was the first and should be treated thus.<sup>16</sup> However, Mathai Kadavil argues that to put a conclusive date on the establishment of this ashram would according to him “not be fare”.<sup>17</sup> Though Kadavil’s argument may seem to be supported by the fact that conflict seems to exist on the exact date of the founding of Bethany ashram,<sup>18</sup> it would appear that the available evidence though differing in precision points in favor of Bethany as being the first ashram in India.

Another study that provided thematic and historical guidance to this research is that of Sr. Vandana. In her book, *Social Justice and Ashrams*, the author developed some features inherent in the Ashram which can promote social justice. Commenting on the need for promotion of justice she rightly observes that justice is “the burning question” of modern times.<sup>19</sup> As she notes, “there is hardly any book one reads or



meeting one attends, where social justice' is not mentioned"<sup>20</sup> Consequently, she offers some suggestion which may assist in the promotion of justice.

Writing in an article published in the *Saccidananda Namah, a Commemorative volume*, published by the Saccidananda Ashram, Paul Pattathu observes that changing times have ultimately brought about changes in ashrams and their practices. He argues that "the age-old ashram system is no more strictly observed by any sections of the society" and observes that "Though there are more ashrams they are all in a new version."<sup>21</sup> The author, alongside others in this book, attributes this change in the life of the ashrams to modernization of society, with its teeming "mass media communication systems", population boom, and what the author thinks is the "blind and rapid imitation of western culture"<sup>22</sup> by Indians.

Contributing in the same volume, *Saccidananda Namah*, Beatrice Bruteau argues that it would be good if the ashrams continue to exist in society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. She observes that ashrams are "important because [they are] the embodiment of spiritual values that", she is convinced are what society needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and even beyond.<sup>23</sup>

Since its arrival on the Indian scene, Christianity has played a significant role in influencing the lives of Indians and their society through its confrontation with the local ideologies and traditions which some of them were barbaric and inhuman. Writing about the impact of Christianity on the Indian society, K.M George in *Christianity in India Through the Centuries*, traces this impact of Indian Christians from the national politics that ushered in change from foreign rule to self-rule to the social influence Christian doctrines had on the morals and social ethics of India. Thus he observes that "The Christian gospel was a source for humanization" and that "one of the important things that the Christian missions emphasized was the humanization of life in all aspect of all people."<sup>24</sup>

Conflicting opinions and beliefs regarding the first person who introduced Christianity into India exists among historians. There are those who attribute the role to Saint Thomas, one of the twelve disciples cum apostles of Jesus and those who attribute it elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> However, it is not a deniable fact that the Indian Christianity community has for a long time been influenced by the Syrian tradition of Christianity.

Upon arrival on the Indian scene, Christians met resistance against conversion to their religion by local Indians a majority of whom were Hindus in faith. Most historians have identified this as the first major factor that necessitated the search for

strategies that would break this barrier. Consequently, indigenization was adopted as the needed strategy. Following this step, Christian ashrams saw their dawn in India as Christians looked upon the ashram which was a common institutionalized cultural and spiritual concept in India, a symbol of the Indian spirit and Indianness, as the handy instrument to achieve this end. Thus evangelistic concerns contributed to the introduction of ashrams into Christianity in India.

Besides, theological closeness between Christianity and Hinduism seems to have contributed significantly towards the adoption of the ashram concept by Christians in India. The two religions hold many things in common. For instance, Christianity believes in the end of the world which ultimately ushers in “the Kingdom of God”; similarly, Hinduism believes in an eschatological theory that also holds that there will be four series of “Kingdom” “following one another in progressive deterioration in a relentless cycle.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, though initially Hinduism did not have any eschatological theologies, today it believes in one just as Christianity does.<sup>27</sup>

Further, politics may have also played a role in the birth of the Christian ashrams in India. Barbara Noreen, *Crossroads of the Spirit*, for instance observes that following “the religious, cultural and social awakening” which took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was the “the rise of nationalism, and the struggle for freedom from British rule”<sup>28</sup>. During this period of nationalistic movements the Indian people were averse to anything reminiscent of foreign rule. Surrounded by this anti-foreign domination fervor Christians in India were compelled to join the bandwagon of anti-foreign rule on Indian soil because failure to do so would and was implicating them as conspirators<sup>29</sup>. Thus the quest for a “identity” by the Indian people that characterized the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also influenced the Indian Christians to adopt ashrams, which as has been pointed out stands as the symbol of the Indian soul and culture.

One fundamental task taking place at an ashram is ‘experiencing God.’ Here humanity searches for God and seeks to experience him because, as K. John Martin observes, “The purpose of ...human existence is to search for God and find his eternal will and live according to that eternal will.”<sup>30</sup> The ashram seems to provide that atmosphere.

However, some Christians discovered to their disappointment that Christianity is not structured in such a way as to allow its adherents to come to the full realization of this sought for experience. Bede Griffiths for example, as Martin claims in his

book, *Bede Griffiths, A Sage and a Prophet*, believed that “Christianity was a dualistic religion, which limited the possibility of God experience to the dualistic level and...closed the door to the advaitic [non-dualistic] experience to her followers limiting that experience only to Jesus.”<sup>31</sup> He asserted that “Jesus opened the door to the possibility of non-dual experience to the (*sic*) humanity but Christianity closed it.”<sup>32</sup>

It was this desire for “advaitic experience” “which was not a possibility in the Christian tradition”<sup>33</sup> that prompted Bede Griffiths to come over to India with his Hindu background and heritage of ashrams, where he sought to experience it. This may suggest that besides evangelistic and nationalistic factors, the quest for deeper spiritual experience played a role in the adoption of ashrams into Christianity in India.

One important aspect which needs attention of historians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the concept of “regional history”. As rightly observed by Umesh Ashokrao Kadam in his introductory essay in the book *Fragments of History*, “regional conception of history” offers several gains to the accumulated history of any a given nation. For instance, as the author observes, sometimes the powers that be in a nation tend to ignore some sections of the society from a historical point of view in an effort to put their own into the limelight on the historical scene to the loss of the true picture of the nation. Thus the author is right to argue that regional histories can serve as a “corrective” to the distortions of a nation’s sum history.<sup>34</sup> Further, due to its “inher[e]nt potential of taping varied kinds of sources for studying the various aspects of history”, this approach helps to bring to light what would otherwise remain unknown to the larger world.<sup>35</sup> Thus regional histories are not just another option. They are an important pursuit worthy time and attention of historians in a nation.

Another significant work is that of Sr. Vandana, ‘*Gurus, Ashrams, and Christians*’ (1978). According to the author Jesus Christ is considered as the guru of all Christian ashrams.

Bede Griffiths in his study of Christian Ashram has treated ashram venture and its progress. The book is partly autobiographical. It also provides an exposition in detail of the author’s view on the contemplative, ecumenical and nonviolent approach to life. He discusses four Christian ashrams which constitute a contemplative ecumenical community in Kerala, South India. At the end of his study he discovers that the essence of Christian ashrams is promotion of justice and peace in the

community. Like the Gandian ashrams, Christian ashrams also strictly observe meditation, non-violence and justice.

*Transforming Mission* by David J. Bosch is a challenging work which helped the researcher. In this book, the author examines the entire sweep of Christian tradition to show historically the Christian understanding of how God saves and what human beings should do in response. Of particular relevance to the current work is Bosch's observation that in its early days Christianity combined evangelistic missions with colonialism so much so that missionaries were seen by the people they were sent to as agents of foreign powers behind them to colonize the nations they were sent them.<sup>36</sup>

Many people have defined education in various way reflecting different values of the authorities making these definitions. However, one basic point on which all educationist seems to strike a consensus is the need for a conducive environment and teacher-student relationship if the process of education is to be a success in society. Echoing this belief, Abalos T. David, a student of Ashram, in his article, "Teacher as Guide" makes the observation that an ashram assist in "developing" this "relationship between the teacher and the students" which according to him is the essence and "art" of education.<sup>37</sup>

Sara Grant's article "The synod on Consecrated Life and the Ashram Tradition" traces the origin and variety of Ashrams historically. The writer concentrates on four main points: the universality of consecration, its charismatic and eschatological dimensions; the role of holy men and women in the society; the constant attention to the teaching of Guru and ashram living as a call to a profound Anubhava (experience of the depths of God.)<sup>38</sup>

Commenting on the importance and the role of the ashram tradition in the Indian culture and history, Savarirayan Jesudason observes that the ashram has turned out to be the labour room of all the wisdom of India and most of what is Indian. As he puts it, "[l]ike human beings, it [the ashram] was generated by life, and in turn became the progenitor of life."<sup>39</sup> Thus the author concurs with many other who identify the ashram with the soul of the Indian culture and Indianness.

Van Bergen after studying Ashram comes to the conclusion that Christian ashrams are patterned after the Hindu "sannyasa ideal"<sup>40</sup>. There are some who even speak of sharing in another's religious experience, but what this precisely means is not yet clear to them. However, the mutual acquaintance means that the experience

leads to an appreciation of Christian and non Christian homeless existence and the removing of unnecessary prejudices with the result that a real dialogue may be brought about.

The history of Christian ashrams in Kerala cannot be considered complete without the mentioning of Acharya K.K Chandy a man considered by his biographer as “an institution” and “not an individual”<sup>41</sup>. Biographer A. Simon George in *Acharya K.K. Chandy, Life and Achievements, A Memoir*, chronicles the not only the life of this important figure in the history of India but also reveals a number of profound contributions Chandy made towards Christian ashrams in Kerala. For instance, he was the “Founder Secretary of the Christavashram (Society of St. Thomas)” in Kerala.<sup>42</sup>

### **Summary**

This brief review of literature suggests that ashrams historically are Vedantic in origins. The influence of the Indian Vedantic philosophy through Hinduism and later on Buddhism on other countries like Palestine, Greece, Egypt and others, spread this concept beyond the borders of India at an early stage where it was adopted and assimilated into the respective cultures and religions of the concerned countries, consequently replicating itself in such religions as Judaism and Christianity, respectively.

Though Christianity has had in history some of its votaries practicing monasticism, a western term for the ashram, initially it did not practice the tradition of running ashrams when it was introduced in India. This was a later development which came about because of social, political and theological factors that the Indian Christian community encountered and sought to address.

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- <sup>1</sup> Michael O Toole, *Christian Ashrams in India* (Pune and satprakashan Sanchar, India: Sat Prachar Press, 1983), p.128.
- <sup>2</sup> Swami Sahajananda, “The Essence of Ashram Life”, *Examiner*. 144 (40), October 1992, 13-14.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Savarirayan Jesudason, *Ashrams, Ancient and Modern, Their Aims and Ideals* (Sri Ramachandra Press, 1937), p.22.
- <sup>5</sup> New Testament. Luke 4:16-19.
- <sup>6</sup> See *The Constitution of The Christu Kula Ashram, Tirupattur*, (Article 1-9) Appendix A.
- <sup>7</sup> Michael O Toole, *Christian Ashrams in India*, p.128 and Swami Sahajananda, “The Essence of Ashram Life”, *op cit*.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Thomas F.X Noble, et al., in *Western Civilization: Beyond Boundaries: Volume 1: To 1715*, *op cit*.
- <sup>10</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Penguin Group, US, 1993.)
- <sup>11</sup> Jesudason, *op cit.*, p.i.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp.ii.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid. pp. ii.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> M. K Kuriakose, *History of Christianity in India: Source Material* (Delhi: The Senate of Serempore College by ISPCK, 2006), pp 322-338.
- <sup>16</sup> *Christian Ashrams: A New Religious Movement in Contemporary India (Studies in Religion and Society, Vol. 20)* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), pp.53.
- <sup>17</sup> Mathai Kadavil, “Mar Ivanios and Bethany Ashram: A Retrospection to the Premier Christian Ashram” in *The Church and Culture in India, Inculturation: Theory and Praxis* (Delhi: Rev. Dr. Ashish Amos of Indian Society for Promoting

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Christian Knowledge, ISPCK, 2010),p.276, edited by Paul Pulikkam and Paul M. Collins.

<sup>18</sup> See for example <http://malankaracatholicchurchuk.com/geevarghese-marivanios.html> (accessed on December, 11, 2012), where the author gives August 15, 1919 as the date.

<sup>19</sup> Sister Vandana, *Social Justice and Ashrams* ( Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation1980),pp.34-35

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Pattathu, “A Brief History of Christian Ashrams”, *Saccidananda Namah, a Commemorative volume* (Tami Nadu, India: Saccidananda ashram, 2002), p.52.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Beatrice Bruteau, “Ashram Life in the Twenty-first Century: The Integration of Polarities” in *Saccidananda Namah, a Commemorative volume*, op cit., p.148.

<sup>24</sup> K.M. George, *Christianity in India Through the Centuries* (Hyderabad, India: Authentic Books, first edition 2007), p.212.

<sup>25</sup> Cyril Bruce Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History* (Delhi: senate of Serempore College, revised edition 1976), pp.17, 14, though he identifies himself with those who believe that Saint Thomas brought Christianity to India, observes that there are those, like the French historian Basnage and Tillemont, who deny the allegations all together. However, he is cautious to add that “None of [the] views can be regarded as proved” (p.17).

<sup>26</sup> Paul Puthanangady (Editor), *Reign of God, Report of the South Asian Workshop on Reign of God (10<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> October 1989)* (Bangalore, India: National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1990), p. 123.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.,pp.121-122

<sup>28</sup> Barbara Noreen, *Crossroads of The Spirit* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1994), p.4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>30</sup> K. John Martin, *Bede Griffiths, A Sage and a Prophet* (Tamil Nadu: Saccidananda Ashram, NA), p.7

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.5.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.11.

<sup>34</sup> Umesh Ashokrao Kadam, *Fragments of History, (Some Aspects of Maratha History)*, (Pune: Paradigm Publication, 2012), p.6.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transformation Missions, Paradigm Shifts Theology of Mission*, (New York: Orbis Books, twentieth edition, 2011)

<sup>37</sup> Abalos T. David, "Teacher as Guide", *Journal of Dharma*, January-March, 1986,11(1):62-75.

<sup>38</sup> Sara Grant, "The Synod on Consecrated Life and the Ashram Tradition", *Vidyajyothi Journal of Theological Reflection* July, 1994, 58(7):433-450.

<sup>39</sup> Savarirayan Jesudason, op cit., p.i.



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<sup>40</sup> Van Bergen, “Contemporary Christian Experiments in Ashram Life”, *Journal of Dharma*3(1), January-March, 1978, pp. 174-194.

<sup>41</sup> A. Simon George, *Acharya K.K. Chandy, Life and Achievements, A Memoir*(Ernakulam: NA),preface.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

## **CHAPTER 3**

# **CHRISTIAN ASHRAMS OF TAMIL NADU: THEIR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL CONTRIBUTION (1920-2003)**

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#### **Introduction**

India is a land that has given birth to major world religions, such as Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, Parsees as well as several tribal communities lived together for centuries in India and each religion played their own cultural and regional identity. But when Christianity was introduced to India by the European Missionaries they gave it a western orientation and eliminated Indian elements from it. Consequently, they introduced their systems and brought with it a predominantly rigid and negative attitude to other religions.

This posed a great threat to the cultural identity of the people in India which subsequently, in reaction to this threat, inspired the founding of Christian Ashrams in the two states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The rationale behind this development was the desire to have a suitable indigenous forum for reflection on the cultural identity for presenting the gospel in India<sup>1</sup>.

#### **Christianity in Tamil Nadu**

Christianity in Tamil Nadu is believed to be 2000 years old. Tradition holds that it was introduced to Tamil Nadu by St. Thomas, one of the Apostles of Jesus Christ between 52-72 AD<sup>2</sup>. Later the colonial age brought a large number of Portuguese, Dutch, British, French and Italian Christians. Priests accompanied them not only to minister the colonizers but also to spread the Christian faith among the millions of non-Christians in Tamil Nadu. Their efforts account for the Christian communities still in existence in this region.

Though Christianity has been around for such a considerable long time, Christians are still a minority community in Tamil Nadu, comprising 6% of the total population. They are mainly concentrated in the southern districts of Kanyakumari 44%, Thoothukudi 17%, and Tirunelveli 11%<sup>3</sup>. The Roman Catholic Church, the Church of South India (C.S.I.) and a few other evangelical denominations together

constitute the entire Christian population in Tamil Nadu. The Latin Rite of Roman Catholic Church is the oldest and the largest among all churches.

In spite of being a minority religious section of the state Christians have contributed significantly to the progress and development of Tamil Nadu. For instance, Christian missionaries have contributed to the state's development in the fields of education, healthcare and literature and establishment of Christian ashrams in this region.

Christian ashrams have been actively aggressive and initiative in their participation in the social and religious transformations of their respective communities. This chapter presents a select few Christian ashrams in this state to demonstrate their influence and contribution on society in the region.

### **Christukula Ashram**

The first among these select Christian ashrams is Christukulaashram which is located in Tirupattur, North Arcot. Tirupattur is a town located in Vellore District, which is one of the oldest towns in Tamil Nadu. It is approximately 40 km from Krishnagiri, 85 km from Hosur, 61 km from Thiruvannamalai and 125 km from Bangalore. This is the second biggest and densely populated town in Vellore district.

The town has mainly small-scale industries and mills. Some people might describe Tirupattur as a satellite town, in which people reside and go to work in nearby industrial towns such as Vaniyambadi and Ambur in the north, but it is an important commercial center from time immemorial. It was a revenue subdivision during British raj and remains so. It has Old Shiva, Vishnu temples and it is well connected by road and rail to other important cities of Tamil Nadu. The name "Tirupattur" means "a group of ten villages/small towns"<sup>4</sup>.

### **Origin of ChristukulaAshram**

Christukulaashram was established following the First World War. It was started by **Dr Savarirayan Jesudason, who was born on August 31, 1882, fifth son of God-fearing parents who taught him how to show love to others, such as visiting sick people, giving Bible studies in Pallayam Kottai, Tirunveli District, and Tamil Nadu.**

**Right after higher secondary school, Jesudason joined Madras Medical College and graduated in 1904 after which he went on to complete his Fellowship of**

the Royal College of Surgeons (FRCS) from Edinburgh in 1910. It was while at Edinburgh that he met **Dr. Earnest Forrester Paton** with whom, after consultation with Indian Christian leaders, he established the ChristukulaAshram (Family of Christ Ashram) at Tirupattur, North Arcot, South India, on March 7, 1921.

The first all India conference of Indian Christians which brought together the various Indian Christian associations was held in Calcutta 1920. During the years immediately preceding the First World War, many professing Christians had been carried away by racism and racial segregation. The organized Churches that should have exercised a ministry of reconciliation and understanding were carried away due to materialistic outlook on life which had opened new channels for exploitation.

However, as one of the aftermaths of the war, the eyes of many people had been opened and some were filled with a new idealism of peace and reconciliation. In order to fulfill this aspiration for peace and reconciliation looming in the minds of people Dr Savarirayan Jesudason and Dr Earnest Forrester Paton, established ChristukulaAshram in Tirupattur, Tamil Nadu<sup>5</sup>.

Affiliated to the National Missionary Society, Christukulaashram was thus, one of the first Protestant ashrams in the region. Its aim and vision was to promote equality between Europeans and Indians and to give an Indian presentation of Christian life and worship. In tune with its vision of promoting equality and peace and human freedom, Christukula ashram was involved in the movement for freedom struggle in India.

Besides Christukula ashram, Dr. S. Jesudason also opened another ashram in Courtallam, a town where he hailed from, which was later developed by **Dr Raja Savarirayan**. This ashram is located closer to *Puli Aruvi* (Tiger Water Falls) and by the side of Tamil Nadu Tourism Development (TTDC) Guest House, on the Tenkasi - Courtallam Road. This ashram offers the entire infrastructure to conduct Christian retreat, closer to Nature. From June to September, the ashram offers the best spa to the visitors. Hence, during these months, this ashram is heavily booked by Christian educational institutions of Thirunelveli and Thoothukudi in Tamil Nadu. It consists of family rooms, dormitories with dining hall and cooking facilities. The *Jebaalyam* (Prayer Hall) is perfect place to conduct morning *dhyana* (meditation) and the silk cotton groves offer the right ambiance for *Sandhya* (meditation at dusk).

### **Regional Identification and Affiliation of Christukula Ashram**

Christukula Ashram, Tirupattur, Vellore District, a registered trust, was established as a religious and charitable trust, by having its headquarters at Tirupattur, North Arcot District (Tamil Nadu), with an objective to form a fellowship, or fellowships, of Christ's disciples in which unmarried men of all countries and colors, communities and denominations have a place and are bound together by the love of Christ, even as the name "Christukula" (Family of Christ) signifies. To carry out the objectives, the Ashram had undertaken health service through well equipped hospital established in the Ashram and it has also established educational institution by admitting poor students and orphans from at every region.

This trust was formed and registered in March 1946 in order to take possession of and administer on behalf of the Ashram, the lands, buildings and appurtenances which up to time had been held in the joint names of the Founders on behalf of the Ashram. The monies invested in Government Securities, Fixed Bank Deposits etc, like-wise held up to this time in the joint names and be made over within a period of three years to the Trustees.

### **Vision and Objectives of Christukula Ashram**

The following are the ashram's objectives:

- 1) "To form a fellowship of Christ's disciples in which unmarried men of all countries and colors, communities and denominations may have a place and be bound together by the love of Christ, even as the name "Christu-Kula" (Family of Christ) signifies."<sup>6</sup>
- 2) Believing that "whatever things are good" in the "Indian spiritual heritage belong also to the realm of Christ's Kingdom",<sup>7</sup> Christukula ashram seeks to promote their observance and practice.
- 3) To love the poor by living a life of simplicity including manual work, and to share with them the privileges which God has provided by working for their spiritual, mental, and material uplift.
- 4) To reveal Christ by their life and practice and endeavor to bring about lives a Christian conduct guided by the fruit of Holy Spirit such as Love, joy, peace, etc

5) To make the Ashram members to cultivate intimate spiritual friendships, brotherly affection and a sense of mutual responsibility to become united in spiritual family.

6) To form a centre where to demonstrate the power of love in building the economic, social and international order through teachings of Christ combined with prayer and action.

7) To form many other Ashrams with similar Aims and objectives.

8) To help people to take definite decision and dedicate their life for Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

The vision of the ashram is to help families in the community develop and experience intimacy; promote fellowship between Christ and the community; growth in faith and prayer life and making the ashram a place of training in Christ and giving peaceful atmosphere<sup>9</sup>.

### **Contribution of ChristukulaAshramto Society**

Christukula ashram since its founding has proved to be a dynamic force of contribution towards the general welfare of the community in which it exists and the state in at large. Following are some of these notable contributions.

#### **Education**

Christukula ashram runs a day school and night schools in villages near the Ashram. These schools provide social, educational and health programs which include the teaching of various life skills and income generating activities to the villagers in the surrounding areas. These schools also provide training and counseling to youth in disciplined Christian living, study, prayer, fellowship and service for humanity.

Besides, having conventional schools, the ashram through its hospital organizes and holds camps for students and youth from the villages where they teach them about sanitation and other hygiene matter which can enhance a better healthy life for the communities. The hospital has a mobile clinic which runs from place to place in the area every Sunday offering free medical treatment for the sick.

Further, Christukula ashram through its publications contributes to the community and the nation at large, by participating in debates or discussions promoting or condemning social practices, which ever applicable at any given time<sup>10</sup>.

Thus through its media resources, the ashram helps in the reformation and improvement of the cultures in the surrounding communities.

### Religious and Spiritual needs

Through vocational bible schools, bible study, prayer groups and retreats held for those in the Ashram and for groups of people coming to the Ashram, or through the formation of a Gurukul, which is open to all, where young men receive training for service to their respective communities and cultivation of personal spirituality, the ashram has made the kingdom of God accessible to all in the area. Thus through this agency, the spiritual needs of the communities are taken care of.

### Social services

The Ashram trains volunteers who are later utilized in serving others. Apetchikans (volunteers) are selected subject to the following conditions:

- a. They should have spent 1 to 3 months in the Ashram as Mithirans.
- b. They should come with the intention of working in the Ashram for a definite period which shall ordinarily be one year in the first instance.
- c. They should ordinarily be at least 18 years of age.
- d. They should be unmarried.
- e. They should promise to obey the Prathama Sevak and they should be prepared to do any form of service given to them.
- f. They shall receive no salary but food and simple personal necessities and expenses for travelling home, or to a place approved by the Prathama Sevak, for holiday once a year.

Those from foreign countries who desire to serve in the ashram are welcome as “apetchikans” provided they fulfill the following conditions:

- a. They should have a thorough understanding of the conditions of the Ashram life and accept the Aim, Basis and Objective of ChristukulaAshram as published in its literature.
- b. They should be personally known to at least one of the Sevaks or else be strongly recommended on personal knowledge by individuals in close personal touch with the Ashram who, command the confidence of the Sevaks.



- c. They should be men of vision and outstanding Christian character and be eager to identify themselves with the people of India.
- d. They should be unmarried and of a healthy physical condition.
- e. They should be graduates of a recognized university or men with some technical or professional qualification –
- f. They should have shown keenness in the service of the poor or of foreigners in their own land.
- g. They should come with the definite intention of serving the Ashram for a period of at least 3 years in the first instance. After 3 years they may, at the unanimous invitation of the Sevaks, be admitted as Bala Sevaks.

An Apetchikin after his initial period of one year may continue in the same capacity for a further period of one to two years if so invited by the Sevaks, or may offer himself as a Bala Sevak if he possesses the qualifications and satisfies the conditions which could enable him to become a Sevak. After three years as an Apetchikin he may also be selected by the Sevaks as a Brahmachari. Apetchikans and Mithirans are followers of any religion, but they should be in sympathy with the aim and ideals of the Ashram and be willing to join regularly in the religious worship prescribed in the Ashram.

Christian ashrams focus on the teachings of Jesus Christ which promote self-denial, sacrifice for the good of others, love and respect for others and above all selfless service to others<sup>11</sup>. Thus, the ashram, through its theological tenets, promotes a culture of mutual respect among people, non-violence to humanity and nature in general, love and tolerance, which is an important and critical ingredient for social-coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups. In brief, socially, Christian ashrams are promoting peace, unity, human rights and general freedom of the people they serve.

### Problems and Challenges

1. Especially for Bala Sevaks (Novices), the conditions imposed are at times very challenging for the reason that, even though they may complete 21 years of age, they are still too young to whole heartedly accept the Basis, Aim and Objectives of the Ashram, and be a Christian as defined in the preamble. So all of you have, the vow to remain in the Ashram for a period of three years initially is also challenging as these young Bala Sevaks may not find always themselves to stay for such a longer

period. The other condition of being unmarried and shall having no family responsibilities, demanding no salary may not always be encouraging for these aspiring Bala Sevaks in view of the modern world and its temptations.

2. The Brahmacharis (Brothers in the service) are very scarce now-a-days, as the aspiring candidates or sevaks for the Ashram are deteriorating, especially the second generation. So also, with the advent of modernism, the number of young sevaks is few in number than before. The researcher saw only the old people who were devoted to the activities of the Ashram. It is saddening to see the decline in the number of young sevaks.

3. Further, the researcher observed that now-a-days, the Ashram is only leader-centered rather than service-oriented—which is not what it was initially established for. It would appear that the Ashram is still surviving only because of some committed sevaks who go on discharging their duties and obligations diligently.

### **Saccidananda Ashram**

#### Location

Saccidananda Ashram (sometimes also known by the name of Shantivanam) is located in the village of Tannirpalli in Tiruchirappally, a district in Tamil Nadu.

#### Historical Background

Saccidananda ashram was founded on March 21, 1950<sup>12</sup> by Jules Monchanin, a French monk of the Benedictine order, who later on adopted the name, Parma Arupi Annanda, and was since known to people by the same, in collaboration with his friend, Henri le Saux, also a French Benedictine monk who, just like his colleague, adopted the name of Abhishiktananda. These Benedictine monks, upon founding this ashram they gave it the name of “Shantivanam” which means “the forest of peace”.<sup>13</sup>

The objective and vision for the establishment of this ashram was to “integrate Benedictine mysticism with the model of an ashram”.<sup>14</sup> The founders of this ashram were of the conviction that religions (specifically, Christianity and Hinduism) could transform each other. Since then, this ashram and the successors of these founding fathers of this ashram have lived to seek and try means that could bring about this integration into reality.

#### Contribution of Saccidananda to Society

Since its establishment, Saccidananda ashram, like many other Christian ashrams in the area, has made significant contributions to society and the people who come in contact with its activities. This is especially true in the social, religious and educational sectors.

## **Social**

On the social side, Saccidananda has been instrumental in skills and capacity building in the community surrounding it. The ashram has a tailoring center where free sewing machines are distributed to the people in the area after training them in tailoring and sewing skills. Through this initiative, the ashram thus is helping in the economic growth of society and the nation at large because the people who benefit from this program are able to stand on their own economically and send support their children's education. This in turn reduces poverty levels and lessens poverty-related-crimes and illiteracy in the area.

The ashram also is participating in the government efforts of improving the quality of life through provision of better houses for shelter. The ashram provides free accommodation its employees, most of whom could not afford a decent house on their own.

When crisis of any kind arises in the surrounding villages, the ashram always participates in providing relief and humanitarian assistance to the affected communities in forms of rice, eggs and milk and other basic essentials. Further, the ashram, through its industries and farms which it operates, offers employment opportunities to the community. This consequently improves the general lives of the community in many other indirect ways.

The ashram also promotes respect for human rights and the freedom of every individual. Through their sermons and lectures, the ashramites discourage anything that violates human dignity and mutual respect. They encourage people to cohabit in society as brothers and sisters regardless of their color, creed, or economic status. Thus the ashram generally promotes tolerance in all forms of social or religious activities.

All these social services are offered to the people of the community irrespective of individuals' religious affiliations. Thus indirectly, the ashram through its non-segregatory attitudes and practices also significantly challenges and influences

the attitudes of the people of the community towards each other, especially in cases of differences in religious affiliations.

### Health

Sometimes the ashram organizes social activities for the youth of the area. During such events youth are engaged in sporting activities of various kinds and free counseling is also provided. Thus due to such activities, the physical, mental and the spiritual needs of the youth of the community is catered for by the ashram. By providing guidance to the youth, the ashram helps in directly, in fighting down crime and HIV and AIDS pandemic which is rampant at the present time besides many other things.

Besides the periodic organized social events, the ashram also regularly organizes health awareness campaigns with various specific themes which include promotion of non-smoking life, drug awareness among others. Through such campaigns many lives which otherwise would have been ruined because of such risky detrimental habits are saved. Thus the health of the general population is improved and drug related crimes are also modulated.

### Spirituality

Saccidananda ashram operates a worship center where people from the community come for various spiritual edification and fellowship. The worship center does not bar non-Christians to attend or visit. During such visits, which people regularly make to the ashram, various spiritual needs and concerns are addressed by the leaders of the ashram. Questions concerning human life and other related matters of value to human existence are answered and people are given hope which sustains their daily life in the public.

Of significance, is the way the ashram conducts its worship activities. They have adopted a worship style which integrates Hindu beliefs and practices and Christian beliefs and practices which makes it easy for the Hindus and other non-Christian visitors to feel at home at these worships.

## **Christu-Shishya Ashram**

Location

Christu-Shishya ashram is found in Coimbatore, in Tamil Nadu. Coimbatore is known as Kovai and is the second largest city in Tamil Nadu with a metropolitan population of over 2 million people.

Historically, Coimbatore region has been ruled by the Cheras, the Cholas, the later Pandyas, the Vijayanagar Empire and the Madurai Nayaks and is believed to have been named after a chieftain called Koyan<sup>15</sup>. In the 17th century, the city became a part of the Kingdom of Mysore and remained so until its conquest by the British East India Company in 1799. However, the history of modern Coimbatore starts from the 1930s, when the city grew rapidly capitalizing on a textile boom. Since then, the city has witnessed steady growth fueled by its favorable soil, climate and political and economic conditions.

Coimbatore is situated on the banks of the Noyyal River in western Tamil Nadu and is surrounded by the Western Ghats on all sides. It is well connected by road, rail and air with major towns and cities in India. Various Christian missionaries spread Christianity in Coimbatore and established various schools and as well as Christian Ashrams to reflect Indian spiritual values and ideals.

#### Historical Background of the Ashram

Christu-Shishya ashram was founded on July 15th, 1936 by Bishop Herbert Pakenham Walsh<sup>16</sup> and his wife, Clare under the inspiration and guidance of mister K.C. Chacko, one of the founders of Union Christian College. Herbert and his wife Clare Hayes were Anglican missionaries who came to India in 1907 from Ireland.

The idea of the establishment of Christu-Shishya ashram can be traced back to the year 1930 when some Orthodox Syrian young men, alumni and the then current students of the Union Christian College, met with K.C. Chacko and formed themselves into what was then called a vocational group. These young people used to come together in retreat twice a year, and began observing some simple rules such as regular confession and communion, remembering in common subjects for prayer and intercession at each retreat, and focused more on the idea of opening a mission field outside the Malayalam-speaking area.

Bishop and Mrs. Pakenham Walsh had just returned from furlough on 22nd November 1935 to Alwaye College. That same evening they invited these young men who had for a long time been pressing the bishop and his wife to establish an ashram

or something close to it, for a meeting with them. It was at this meeting where the Pakenhams revealed their decision to start an ashram.

When everything was explored and done Coimbatore was chosen as the most appropriate place for the establishment. Consequently, on 1st January 1936, the Bishop, Mrs. Pakenham Walsh and K.C. Varghese occupied the open rest house (Sathram) at the turn of the road to Thadagam in Coimbatore. On July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1936, the Ashram was formally inaugurated.

#### Regional identification and affiliation of Christian ashram

Christa Sishya Ashram is registered as an 80G Charitable Trust under the Indian Income Tax Act-III No.3274 (479) 2006-2012/CIT-III/CBE with the Government of Tamil Nadu.

The Ashram Trust oversees all its auxiliary units:

St. Gregorious Bala Bhavan

Bishop Walsh Memorial School

Bishop Walsh Memorial Hospital

Claire Walsh Memorial

#### Contribution of Christu-Shishya Ashram to Society

#### **Education and reform**

Christu-shishya Ashram was founded by Bishop Walsh to fight against ignorance, pride, hatred, and prejudice, which treats human beings with injustice. In 1996 the ashram established Bala Bhawan (Boys Home) which serves as a home for socially and economically vulnerable children from the catchments area of Thadagam and its surrounding villages. The ashram's aim was to make them productive citizen by helping their total personality development, educating, and helping to realize their own ambitions. Children followed their own strict timetable to discipline and partake in activities to impart the benefits of hard work, practical experience, and team work.

Continuing the efforts and vision of Bishop and Mrs. Walsh Fr. K.V. Yakob started a nursery school in 1995 on the Ashram grounds which has grown to an English-medium primary school at the time of writing this paper. Bishop Walsh Memorial School has been approved and recognized by the State of Tamil Nadu. The plan is to expand the school one standard up every year until it reaches 12th Standard.

Fees are kept at a minimum and in several cases, education is provided free of cost. Transportation to the school is also provided at a subsidized rate with two buses purchased via bank loans. The school serves the children of economically challenged families within the local villages, and therefore the Ashram and its friends wishes to provide the highest quality English medium education at the lowest cost possible. This is the schools mission and vision.

## **Health**

### **Bishop Walsh Memorial Hospital**

Bishop Walsh's care and concern for persons afflicted with various physical and mental ailments resulted in the start of a dispensary and the Bishop Walsh Memorial Hospital opened its doors in 1992. The current hospital building and medical centre would not be possible without the tireless efforts of the late Bishop H.G. Philipos Mar Eusebius, a former member and Acharya of the Ashram.

By the grace of Lord Jesus Christ and the dedicated services of doctors and medical and paramedical staff it is making steady progress. Service to out-patients and in-patients are on the rise. Rates are within the reach of the poor and marginalized patients. Free treatment is given to many deserving cases and the hospital continues to be a blessing to the communities around the hospital.

### **Other Activities:**

Health, dental and eye camps in collaboration with local NGOs and governmental agencies, School health camps, Networking with other health centers, counselingcentre has been started. The hospital gives specialized treatment to the poor and marginalized patients with the help of visiting senior consultants, at subsidized rates.

### **Problems and challenges**

### **St. Gregorious Bala Bhavan**

Ladies Living Quarters

The current building that houses Ms. Mariamma and Ms. Sukumari is in desperate need of repair. These ladies have served the Ashram since 1945 and 1987 respectively. Safety of the two ladies who have faithfully served the Ashram and its members is the first and foremost priority. Furthermore, repairs will also allow adding 4 more rooms to the Balabhavan to take in more children.

#### Roof for Balabhavan

The roof for Balabhavan home for orphans leaks and internal walls and structural columns are damaged. Immediate works are required to avoid irreparable damages. All funds have been diverted to Ladies Living Quarters.

#### Rising Cost of Living

The rise in costs of every day commodities for daily living is affecting the ashram in its operations. It is becoming difficult to sustain their goals and programs due to increasing food and fuel costs. Consequently, some of the programs have to be abandoned if no help is found to support them.

#### Tutoring

The children require tutors to help them with their studies.

#### Bishop Walsh Memorial School

The School needs donations of material and funding for construction of expansion of the school. The students need donations of computer equipment notebooks, paper, etc to keep expenses down.

#### Bishop Walsh Memorial Center-Smritimandiram

This is to be a small museum in honor of Bishop Walsh including his personal belongings.

#### Retreat Center

This center is to be built in the Ashram premises to hold ecumenical meetings as well as bible study courses for those who wish to visit the Ashram as groups. Several requests had to be denied thus far due to lack of facilities. Alcohol rehabilitation, youth counseling, and family counseling will also be part of the programs taken up by the Retreat Center.



## Anbu Vazhvu Ashram

### Introduction

Anbu Vazhvu is located in the small town of Palani situated 360 km south west of Madras, in Tamil Nadu right at the foot of Kodikanal hills, a popular tourist spot. The town is famous for the Hindu temple situated on a small hill dedicated to the god Muruga, the son of Shiva and Parvathi. This holy place attracts thousands of Hindu people who come on pilgrimages to have a Darshan of the deity.

Anbu Vazhvu Ashram is an autonomous society registered in India under the fathers of the Holy Cross who are also responsible for its operational finances. Like all the other Catholic ashrams in India it is operated and encouraged by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) through its liturgical commission for consultation and meetings.

### Historical Background

Anbu Vazhvu Ashram was founded and established by Father Philippe M.P, a French-Canadian Roman Catholic priest on December 23, 1972. The process was started with his moving with K.T Chacko from Noakkhali to Palani where they settled in that year. For a period of six years (1972-1978) the ashram successfully functioned in three different rented houses situated in Shanmugapuram colony in Palani town. After having bought six acres and 36 cents of land in Kallikainayaganpatti road, they built few houses and started to live there from the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July 1978.

Originally, father Philippe came to Noakkhali from Canada in 1945 as a missionary and was the most active and resourceful member of the team that worked in the Diocese for 15 years until his move to Palani in 1972. From his childhood, father Philip had nursed a dream in which he wanted to become a contemplative and desired to dedicate his life to the service of God and humanity. While in India he was appointed to the new foundation in South India where he became for some time, the Religious Superior and then in charge of houses of formation for young recruits at Yercaud and Trichy.

With all the zeal of his youthful energies, father Philippe mastered the language, deepened his knowledge of the culture of the country. He visited and loved the people. He discarded all Western ways as much as possible and adapted himself to

the ways of the people in prayers, dress, food, furniture, which is an indigenous customs. This helped him to establish his vision of an ashram easily.

Since then Anbu Vazhvu ashram has grown extensively. Today the ashram has eight members under the leadership of an enlightened guru.

#### Ideology of Fr. Philip

The institution of family is one of the basic foundations of the local society. Influenced by individualism and alien cultures this component of the Indian society is fast degenerating. In order to rejuvenate this, the Ashram must play a vital role in family ministry.

1. Ashram ministry must be faith promoting.
2. Ashram must promote awareness among people about the sacredness and importance of ecology and environment.
3. Ashram must sow the seeds of its faith among young generation and promote leadership that will remain as catalysts among the future society.
4. Ashram should strive to establish religious harmony.
5. Ashram should pay special attention to the healing ministry especially that which is related to the inner side of pathology.
6. Ashram should remain a place with a spiritual atmosphere especially with prayers and meditations.
7. Ashram should be a Nodal centre for change and empowerment of the downtrodden.
8. Ashrams as Disciplining Tool for Hindus of India

The Sanskrit word “ashram” means withdrawal from the world work. It refers to a spiritual retreat center or community that is engaged in spiritual pursuits. Ashram is sometimes defined as a place of peace in the forest where a community of disciples lives under the guidance of a guru to learn about God through experience. In ancient India, during the Vedic period between 800-500 B.C. ashrams were founded by the “rishis” (prophets) in the forest or in a secluded area on the banks of the rivers surrounded by beautiful scenery. These ashrams were described as laboratories for religious experiments. Traditionally the ashrams were the centers of learning, retreat, and disciple making. Some of them also served as schools similar to the school of prophets found in the old treatment. Young men from noble families came to the

ashram for education and training concerning the duties of life, then return to society to live as responsible citizens. The vanaprasathis, who retired from the society after obtaining a wealth of experience, prepared the students for a life of responsibility in the society.

Even today, the Hindus who thirst for the knowledge of God search after a suitable guru by going from one ashram to another because, they believe that only a guru could help them on spiritual matters through various "sadhanas". The ashrams and gurus are increasing in numbers in these modern times to meet the spiritual needs of Indians as well as others coming from west in search of meaning and purpose in life.

In the past, ashrams had no rigid structures or formal constitutions. However, they had certain operating principles and goals. The guru was considered to be the center and heart of the ashram. He directed the activities of the Ashram and the Ashramites responded to his instruction with obedience and humility. By a simple and pious life, the guru was able to exert great influence on those under his discipleship.

The Ashrams in modern India are also established by the gurus and now a simple structure due to government regulations. Since the ashrams own property, the government requires the board of trustees to handle the financial affairs. Although the guru is still the sole head of the ashram, he acts through the board of trustees regarding secular matters relating to the ashram. The succession of leadership is left to the guru who often names one of his disciples as head of the ashram before he dies.

In contemporary India, the ashrams have been modified to meet the spiritual, social and intellectual needs of people. For example, leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Vivekananda, Aurobindo and Sivanada started ashrams to meet the political and spiritual quests. Following the examples of these Hindu leaders some Christian leaders who were hungering for an Indian mode of Christ life, witness and service started the Christian ashram movement in India and attempted to make Christianity meaningful and relevant to Indians in the context of the Hindu spiritual tradition. The Christian spiritual life includes the experience of prayer, love, peace, forgiveness, and freedom, joy, sharing and serving. However, it lacks the experiences of solitude, silence, contemplation, devotion, self-surrender, simplicity, renunciation, continence, self-realization, and bliss. Although Christ exemplified these qualities in his life on earth, many Christian teachers and ministers in India do not practice them. Christian ashrams have emerged to fill this spiritual gap in the lives of the Christians.

Dr. S Jesudason, Dr. E. Forrester-Patton, father Jack Winslow of the Anglican Church and the Catholic Fathers J. Monchanin and Le Saux started Christian ashrams in which they tried to express the ideals of Christian service and spirituality in harmony with their particular church tradition. These ashrams are still alive and continue to attract the Hindus. There are over 50 Christian ashrams in India adopting Christian witness to the spiritual and political climate in India.

Dr. S. Jesudason and Dr. E. Forrester-Patton started the first Christian ashram in India to express the ideals of Christian service at Thiruppathur, Tamil Nadu in 1921. They built a house of prayer in Dravidian style of temple architecture that was used for indigenous modes of worship. Since then, it has been great attraction to many Hindus to come there for worship. The Hindu villagers from nearby places benefit from the school and the hospitals this ashram operates. This ashram still remains, as the indigenous expression of Christian faith and service in this part of India.

In the same period father Jack Winslow of Anglican Church started an ashram in Pune, Maharashtra State to live the gospel in the context of Hindu spiritual tradition. This ashram developed indigenous forms of worship and methods of prayer congenial to the religious climate of India and had close links with the leaders of freedom movement. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi himself stayed here once and participated in the meditation. Hindus who came here felt accepted and loved. From its start, this ashram community had a Hindu member to help with its religious and social services. This ashram did not aim at converting the Hindus but to live the life of prayer amidst the Hindu community of Pune.

J. Monchanin and H. Le Saux founded the famous catholic ashram at Kulithalai, Tamil Nadu known as Saccidananda Ashram on the banks of the river Cauvery, in 1950. Then Bede Griffiths came in 1968 wanting to demonstrate to the Hindus in spiritual greatness of Christianity through the contemplative life style. He stated that the ashrams could become authentic centers of Indian spirituality leading people through the Upanishadic methods of prayer and meditation. He felt that ideal of Christian sannyasin could be a powerful starting to approach the Hindus. Griffiths also attempted to interpret the doctrine of trinity in the context of Advaita system of Hinduism, which is the most powerful philosophical system in India. Through the contemplative life he tried to help people realize the mystery and nature of Absolute. He used the Christian view of the trinity and concept of the incarnation of God in

Jesus Christ to the realization of the mystery of the Ultimate Reality of the Advaita Vedanta.

These ashrams are similar in many ways to Hindu ashrams, but in certain aspects they are different. Unlike the Hindu ashrams, Christian ashrams in general, are not centered on a visible guru. It is because they believe that Christ is the “sadaguru” (true guru). However each Christian ashram has a leader known as “acharya”, who is looked upon for spiritual guidance. He is respected by the ashramites but not revered as guru. Another difference is that the Christian ashrams are not just a community engaged only in holy living. Christian ashrams communicate Christ to the world and engage in social service. In addition, Christian ashrams are well organized with the flexible power structure, goals, objectives, rules, guiding principles and activities.

Christian ashrams are Para-church communities existing independent of the institutionalized churches, yet related to certain denominational church traditions and orders. For example, the Saccidananda Ashram of Bede Griffith is affiliated to the Camadolese branch of the Benedictine order and the Christukula Ashram of Thirupathur was established with the direction from National Missionary Society. They are not anti church institutions, but independent, indigenous, communities that spontaneously emerged in response to the missiological challenges in India. Christian ashrams in general serve as a great asset to the Church and the cause of Christ in India. The Christian spirituality manifested in Christian ashrams is an enormous source of inspiration to many Hindus who are not attracted by religious life of the churches that appeared to them as Western cultural colonies. Christian ashram itself is a new way of being a Church, providing the environment that enriches the spiritual life of the Church.

The word ashram still has great attraction to Indian people because of its connection with ancient hermitages of the rishis who lived a holy life of prayer and meditation. Therefore, the name ashram should not be used carelessly just for any Christian institution as is often the case presently in referring to the orphanages, hospitals, or other social service units of the Church. Hindus are offended when the word ashram is misused or when the ashram is established with a purpose of proselytism. Ashrams established only with the purpose of promoting the principles of spirituality, community and service.

“Spirituality” refers to the spiritual aspect of life that is focused on knowing and experiencing God within oneself by transcending self. It is the experience of abiding in God or feeling the presence of God within through sadhanas such as study, prayer, reflection, contemplation, intense longing for salvation, renunciation, complete surrender of the will to God, disinterested benevolence, faith and yoga. Christian spirituality is centered on Christ and it is the response to the redeeming love revealed in the historical person of Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. It is also an eschatological spirituality because it is centered on the faith in the soon coming of Christ. This faith shapes the Christian life in the world causing a person to live a holy life of renunciation, prayer, witness, persecution, martyrdom. Thus, Christian spirituality differs from Hindu spirituality for the latter is based on the pessimistic way of looking at life, history and world, the inner reality of self and its identity with ultimate reality Brahman. Spirituality in the ashrams also expressed in terms of simplicity in dwellings, food, and dress.

The name Christian Ashram itself clearly indicates that Jesus is the center of this ashram, and that to bring joy (bliss), peace (shanthi), and harmony in the world through compassionate service. Service is considered as the practical expression of Bhakti (devotion) to Jesus Christ. He is exalted through word and deed so that he would draw all people unto him. Most of the Christian Ashrams adopted the missiological principles enlisted in two missionary texts found in Luke 4:18-19 and Romans 15:20, which are to preach the gospel to the people who never heard the gospel, heal the broken hearted, give freedom to the captives and liberty to the oppressed. Accordingly, on communicating Christ to the Hindus and do various types of service to the needy.

The Anbu Vazhvu ashram has adopted principles such as spirituality, contextualization, service, simplicity, unity, health and witness as guiding principle to reach this goals and objectives. Its goal is to make Christ known among the Hindus and to influence the Hindu society with the values of Kingdom of God taught by Jesus Christ. Its objectives are to develop indigenous form of worship and witness, to serve as a center for religious dialogue, study and training, to provide philanthropic service in the neighborhood.

Contributions of Anbu Vazhvu Ashram to Society

Anbu Vazhvu, just many other ashrams in various parts of India has made and continues to make significant contributions to society in almost all facets of societal life. However, agriculture and spirituality seems to dominate the scene than do the others.

### **Agriculture**

The ashram owns six acres of land on which they run both animal and crop husbandry, respectively. They have started a small dairy form with a few cows and they supply and sell milk to the town for their daily expenses. The ashram also has thirty six coconut palm trees which give a good yield when the monsoons are good.

Besides, the ashram also maintains a good vegetable garden from which they get most of their vegetables. The rest of the land is used for the production of corn, ground nuts, green grams, black grams and on few occasions paddy when the rainy season is good. One fifth of the ashram's income comes from the farm while donations and others make up for the remainder.

Thus both directly and indirectly, Anbu ashram contributes to the social-economic welfare of not only the immediate community in which it is located, but also the entire nation. Local from the ashram neighborhood find employment at the ashram which helps them maintain their families. Through its informed agricultural practices, the ashram also contributes to the community by facilitating capacity building and social empowerment.

### **Influence through contact**

As an ashram Anbu Vazhvu is open to all people from all walks of life who come in search for the various services the ashram offers. While some visit the ashram for touristic interests, many do so for spiritual exercises and pilgrimages. Depending on the purpose of the individual visitor, visitors spend varied times at any given time. There are those who spend a few hours to a day, and those who stay longer, sometimes to as long a couple of years. Most of those who stay longer tend to be those who would like to learn how to run an ashram with the intention of opening their own upon return to their homes.

Thus the ashram is used as a centre of training in spiritual discipline and culture as well. For this reason the ashram operates a library which is equipped with books on different aspects of knowledge and education in general, especially

spiritually oriented literature, where people come to read and even do research on various spiritual aspects of religion.

Through these contacts with the community, Anbu Vazhvu ashram consequently helps in shaping and modulating the cultures of the surrounding communities. Its library services which are open to all provide opportunities for informal education to the people in the area.

### **Spirituality**

The ashram through the dynamics of its programmes provides guidance in spirituality to the community. At the beginning of every training the ashramites have to spend two years in the ashram to acquire the spirit of the ashram under the guidance of the Guru who introduces them to prayer, meditation, and Sadhanas (self-realization). Just like in many other Christian ashrams, the study of the Bible and the elements of spiritual life are given preeminence in this ashram.

#### Visit of F. Madore to Anbu Vazhvu Ashram in Palani Tamil Nadu

In December 1972, K.T. Chacko and F. Madore reached Palani with the firm desire to start an experiment of Ashram life. Fr. M.S. Lawrence was the Parish Priest received them with fraternal love and interest. The priority of an Ashram life is to experience contemplative prayer and growth in the experience of God. Study was another priority to know more about the requirement of the ideal. The third priority was to accept some of the ideals of Gandhi: social works a means to improve the lot of the people who live around Palani and to teach the dignity of labour, importance of simple life.

They both started this experiment in living in Kasinathan's house in Kumara Nagar, New Palani. During the week they were fully engaged in the Ashram program, on Sunday F. Madore helped the Parish Priest in celebrating Holy Mass for the people and sharing spiritual activities.

One Sunday along with the Parish Priest, F. Madore went to Therassamal Colony for a meeting with young people of the locality. Therassaammal Colony was a part of Palani Parish where lived eighty three families mostly poor. The subject of the meeting was to study the possibilities of initiating a project to help the youth and their families, socially and economically. Most of them were, Drummers (Town Criers) a



group of people, beating their drums, to announce a new film starting in the nearby cinema halls or announce other events: the death of a local person etc.

The exchange and discussion led them to the proposal of starting a “band set” composed of 15 to 16 members, playing different instruments. This Band Set could play at the occasion of marriages, church—temple festivals, reception of high officials. There was a need for such a band set in this area and the other band set was sixty kilometers from Palani.

So it was decided to study the possibility of the Project. Fr. M.S. Lawrence — Parish priest of Palani opened the topic to Fr. Descary, who as Holy Cross Superior had come to Palani for a visit. With his help and recommendation “Peace & Development” granted the required capital.

Before starting anything concrete, Fr. Lawrence was transferred from Palani to Trichy, and his last will, before leaving Palani was to entrust this project and money to the members of Ashrams.

The 6<sup>th</sup> September 1977 brought a great joy to the new members. The necessary instruments were bought from ‘Premsons’ Bangalore and transported to Palani by car. As consequence of training to the band members, during this year the band has been requested to teach music to the School Guide at the Municipal Girl’s High School, Palani. Regarding their uniform one tailor from Salem town accepted to prepare their first uniform which was delivered within a month, 1) To develop their talents in music, 2) To help members to come up socially and economically and 3) To help them to become better citizens of India. This project started in 1977, is still alive, but has grown as a famous Band Set in this area and in the neighborhood of Pollachi, Udunalpet, Coimbatore, Dharapuram, Dindugal etc.

### **Economic Contribution**

Besides the Common funds, the members from their earnings have started a small deposit scheme. The Band Set’s income and Small Deposit Fund have improved a lot, the life—style of the members, especially in time of difficulties.

One of the great desires of this Ashram would be to acquire enough land so that each member may have their piece of land on which he can build their houses and all of them can live together.

## Church Missionary Society (CMS) Ashram, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu

### **Location**

Tirunelveli also known as Nellai, and historically during British rule called as Tinnevely, is a city in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It is the headquarters of the Tirunelveli District in Tamil Nadu. It is situated 700 kilometers, southwest of the state capital Chennai, and about 130 km from Thiruvananthapuram, capital of Kerala. Tirunelveli is an ancient city and is home to many temples and shrines, including the largest Shiva temple in Tamil Nadu, the Nellaiappar Temple. It is located on the western side of the Thamirabarani River, whereas its twin town Palayamkottai is located on the eastern side.

### **Establishment**

Christianity came to Tirunelveli through the efforts of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). The CMS and the society for propagation of gospel entered Tirunelveli in 1924. The leader of CMS at the time was Mister Rhenius who under his leadership planted several churches in Tirunelveli districts. He was considered to be one of the greatest missionaries and, consequently, people called him 'the Apostle of Tirunelveli'. Nazareth, Sawyerpuram and Idayangndi were some of the important places where CMS established schools and hospitals besides worship houses. However, the biggest of the Christian congregation that formed the Church of South India was established in 1947.

Since its establishment in Tirunelveli, Church Missionary Society Ashram has been striving hard to address the economic, educational and social needs of the poor. The aged, the mentally retarded, the visually disabled, were some of the major concerns for this Ashram. This Ashram has been known all over Christendom as of a field most congenial to the sowing of the gospel and very responsible to the missionary effort, and the most thriving as an Ashram in India. This region came to be exposed to Christianity which accompanied the European powers who came to trade with India. The earliest were the Portuguese St. Francis Xavier, though he came with royal authority and as the Papal Nuncio to India, choose to work his own way into the hearts of the Indians. The most abiding and effective character was the thrust into Tirunelveli by the Danish missionaries and the earliest among them was Ziegenberg

and Plutschau and they had been doing excellent work in Tirunelveli in the name of Ashrams.

#### Eventful period of CMS (1896 – 1924)

For three quarters of a century the two great streams of CMS and SPG had been watering the Tirunelveli Church. The smallness of the field made it inevitable that these streams should ultimately coalesce. The years 1896 – 1924 may be regarded as an eventful period during which the waters of these two streams began mingling, until they could issue in one single torrent as the Tirunelveli Diocese.

#### The birth of the Bishopric

Until 1896 Tirunelveli was part of the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Madras, to assist whom Dr. Sargent and Dr. Caldwell had been consecrated as Assistant Bishops in 1877. The system of "Society Bishops" was not a very satisfactory one; and with the passing away of these two stalwarts in 1890 and 1891, the SPG in particular, urged the creation of a separate bishopric for Tirunelveli, for whose endowment it generously voted in 1891 a sum of £ 5000. It took 5 years to overcome certain legal difficulties in the way; and on 28th October 1896 Rev. Samuel Morley was consecrated at Madras as Bishop of Tirunelveli and Madurai. A suitable Bishopstowe was built at Palayamkottai to provide residence for the Bishop and house his office. A lovely chapel was added to it by Bishop Waller.

#### The Jubilee interlude

Before any tangible advance could be made towards the merging of the missions, both the Societies had good reasons for pausing a while to celebrate significant landmarks in their histories. CMS was born in London on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1799. Its first Centenary was fittingly celebrated at Palayamkottai in 1899 amidst scenes of great enthusiasm. To commemorate the occasion was built the CMS Centenary Hall in Tirunelveli – easily one of the biggest halls in South India with a capacity to accommodate 3000 people. In addition to its being used for children's services and special missions, it is being used extensively as a public hall for many deserving cultural purposes.

Two years later a bi-centenary of the SPG was celebrated at Sawyerpuram in February 1901 in which the leaders of CMS congregations also took a full share.

Bishop Williams set the ball rolling for the "Diocesanisation", when he convened on 28th January 1908 a meeting of all clergymen in his Bishopric and lay representatives of the CMS and the SPG congregations. Many such dialogues followed when differences were ironed out one by one. A common magazine came to be issued and a Common Prayer Book came to be used. A Constitution for the new Diocese was hammered out.

The Tinnevely Diocesan Trust Association was constituted to administer the properties of CMS and SPG. The "Diocesanisation" was almost an accomplished fact before its most redoubtable champion, Bishop Waller, was translated to Madras in 1922. It now remained only to set the formal seal of approval to the Diocesan Constitution. That was left to Bishop Tubbs.

A historic session of the Diocesan Council was held on 11th March 1924 to formally usher into birth the Diocese of Tirunelveli. Both the CMS and the SPG had sent their blessings to the new Diocese, ultimately the product of their joint enterprise and effort. A Central Diocesan Office was established, and for administrative convenience 3 Church Councils (North, Central and South) were set up in 1925

### Contributions to Society

#### **Education**

CMS runs a school for the visually handicapped persons at Palayamkottai in the area. Askwith School for the visually handicapped, as the school is known, was established 1908.

Askwith had a strange beginning. Miss Askwith, C.M.S. Missionary was the Manager of the Sarah Tucker Institutions at Palayamkottai. One day in 1888 a blind boy came to the compound to beg. When he found that he had come into a school, he began to beg for education instead of for alms. Pondering his need, Miss Askwith dreamed of a school for the blind children. She went home to study how to teach the blind, and in 1890 the first class for the blind children was opened. After carefully and affectionately tending the tree for 18 years in the Sarah Tucker Campus, this noble lady transplanted it to its present place, 'Tharisanamanai' in 1908; and it has steadily grown to be one of the biggest of its kind in India, providing general education and vocational training to its inmates, who number more than 400 at present.

Since 1981 - the International Year for the Disabled Persons - much emphasis was being laid on Integrated, Educational Program for the Visually Handicapped, which is being carried out by specially trained teachers in 13 Centres in this Diocese, benefiting 103 visually handicapped persons.

### **Pre-School for the Visually Handicapped**

Besides running the school for the visually handicapped persons of relatively school going ages, the ashram also has a section for pre-schoolers who are also visually challenged. Here about 20 toddlers are being looked after.

**Residential High School for the Visually Handicapped**—Standard I to X. Government syllabus is being followed. 179 students are benefited.

**Industrial Training Centre for the Visually Handicapped**—Visually Handicapped are trained along with Polio affected and Hearing impaired persons and they bind notebooks.

**Workshop for the Visually Handicapped**—30 young adult Visually Handicapped women and men are weaving handloom clothes like Bed Sheets, Towels and Hand Towels.

**Computer Braille Press**—The visually handicapped persons print some of their school books, guides and also Psalms.

**Home for the Aged Visually Handicapped Women**— About 30 Aged Visually Handicapped women are nurtured and cared for in this home.

**Sales Room Counter**—The finished products like Bed Sheets, Towels, are sold out to the public through this Counter.

### **Children's Mission BaliarSangam**

One small agency of the Diocese whose work through the years has exerted a most abiding and far-reaching influence on the life of the Church is the Tinnevely Children's Mission founded in 1891. 20th June 1891 is a red letter day in the history of Christianity in the Tirunelveli Diocese. It was the day when a few prayer warriors prayed together in Osborne School, Palayamkottai and formed 'BaliarSangam' a

separate unit in the Diocese to work among school going children. It was the oldest and the only Sangam in India for such a noble cause. The Tamil word 'Baliar' means 'Kids' and 'Sangam' means a 'club/organization'. From the beginning the Mission has encouraged the habit of Daily Bible Reading among children by its 3 publications- "*Baliar Nesan*" (a monthly magazine for children in Tamil with daily Bible Reading portions and short notes), Scripture Union Cards and Almanacs. 18500 copies of 'Baliar Nesan' and, 3000 copies each of the Scripture.

Union Cards and Almanacs find their way into as many Christian homes not only within the Diocese, but even outside as far as Sri Lanka, Malaysia and the Gulf Countries. An English edition of '*Baliar Nesan*' has been recently published. Scripture examinations for children are conducted every year; and prizes awarded.

### **The Vacation Bible School (VBS)**

The valuable supplementary work among children was conducted in several centers. During the Michaelmas vacation every year the Children's Mission arranges a camp at Courtallam, the famous spa of South India.

The Diocese is fortunate in possessing at Courtallam an ideally situated bungalow - 'Rock Hall'. This is being used throughout the year for S.C.M. Camps, Retreats for Clergy and other Diocesan Workers.

The 'Sangam' aims at training the children in reading and understanding the Bible and praying to God. It also conducts many competitions among them to encourage their habit of pondering over and memorizing the verses of The Bible. The winners are given gold coins or medals as prizes.

Every year, on a Sunday, children go singing from door to door and collect offertory to support the missions of this Sangam. And that Sunday called 'Baliar Gnayiru'. Every week the ministry of the Lord is done among the students in different schools at different levels. Every month, Bible Clubs also conducted among the students at the primary and Middle School levels.

### **Good Shepherd Camps:**

In all eight councils, camps for the children are conducted. Around 2500 children come and participate in them. Once in a year, camps are also conducted for them in Courtallam, a place surrounded by green hills with girdling waters.

**Communication Center:**

Two full time workers serve in this center. Bible verse are printed in Calendars, papers and cards and distributed to the children. Greetings for various occasions like Birthday, Wedding are also printed here and sent to the members and supporters of this Sangam.

**Offset Press:**

Two full time employees work here in the press. They take care of the Baliar Nesan, Song Books, hand bills, etcetera.

**Christian Education Department**

This department was started on 21 – 06 – 1987 to strengthen the children in the Bible knowledge. Children in churches and schools are categorized according to their age and encouraged to learn and study the Bible, discern the false teachings, live witnessing living, know the history and the growth of the churches and get strengthened in their faith in the Lord.

Teachers Guide, materials and work book are also published by this Sangam. Students at schools are given learners guide to learn more things from The Bible. In the month of February, a test is conducted for the students and attractive prize are given to the winners.

Training camps for the Sunday school teachers are conducted periodically.

Every year, through this Sangam, around 3, 00,000 students are reached at different place in the Diocese, of which most of them are Non – Christian Students.

**Primary and Middle Schools**

The wisdom of the early missionaries who conceived the school as a valuable adjunct of the Church can never be questioned. It is said of Rhenius that whenever he found the soil resistant to a church, he planted a school. The innate regard among Indians for the schoolmaster as the 'Guru' was used to good purpose; and in most cases the village school was the forerunner of the village church.

Today dotted all over the district there are 490 Primary Schools and 155 Middle Schools run by the Tirunelveli Diocese. Long before the Government paid serious attention to elementary education, there has been this network of Christian schools promoting literacy among the villagers and testifying to Christ. They have

been the nucleus of the Tirunelveli Church; and most of their teachers, who are voluntary catechists in their respective congregations, are the mainstay of the rural church.

### **High School and Higher Secondary**

In course of time High Schools were set up in favorable centres. To-day there are, in the Diocese, 29 Higher Secondary Schools and 4 High Schools. Some of them like the 2 High Schools for Boys founded by the C.M.S. in Palamcottah (1871) and Tirunelveli (1880), Megnanapuram (1891) and their S.P.G. counterparts St. John's Girls' High School, Nazareth, the first High School for Girls in the whole of South India (1886), Caldwell High School Tuticorin (1883) and Victoria Girls' High School, Tuticorin (1887) (Picture on inside back cover) have since become Higher Secondary Schools and hit their centenaries in recent years.

Later on the burden of starting and maintaining the High Schools has been increasingly taken over by the sponsoring local Churches, the Diocese being responsible for providing the staff and exercising general supervision over them. The local Church very often finds the necessary land, raises the money for the buildings and endowment, and makes an annual contribution towards the cost of running the School. It has its representatives on the Governing Board of the School. Thus the School is knit into the life of the Church, each necessarily having a concern for the other. Students and members of the Staff help in the Church Choir, evangelistic efforts of the Church, harvest festivals etc; and the coming up of a High School has invariably contributed to the prosperity of the local Church and the fullness of its spiritual life.

It is a matter for gratification that our schools have been able to maintain consistently high standards in education. This has been reflected not only in the creditable results in Government examinations, but also in our schools distinguishing themselves in extra-curricular activities. Exemplary hostels and boarding houses, facilities for Scouting, N.C.C. and A.C.C. training, organized sports and games, the School Choir have all been contributing to the development of body, mind and spirit of the several lakhs of boys and girls who have been passing through them.

### **Colleges**



The Teacher Training Schools are so vital educational set up. Their importance was realized by the early missionaries who founded the Bishop Sargent Training School for Men, Palamcottah (1856), Sarah Tucker Training School for Women, Palamcottah (1858) and St. John's Training School for Women, Nazareth (1877). There was a time when even schools in Madras and Ceylon asked for teachers trained in these Schools. In 1934 was added yet another Oolyasthanam Training School for Women at Palaya Pettai near Tirunelveli Town.

The Teachers Training Institutes and Polytechnic in the Diocese are:

1. Bishop Sergeant Teachers Training Institute, Palayamkottai
2. Oolyasthanam Teachers Training Institute, Palayapettai
3. Sarah Tucker Teachers Training Institute, Palayamkottai

### **Medical Mission**

Medical Mission initiated by the S.P.G. at Nazareth, Sawyerpuram, Idaiyangudi and Nagalapuram has been found most rewarding. In the early years when medical facilities provided by the Government were meager and inadequate, these hospitals eminently served the community. St. Luke's Hospital, Nazareth has kept on with the march of modern medicine. Its phenomenal growth was during the stewardship of Dr. R. Vedabodagam, when several new wards - mostly gifts of grateful patients - were erected. In recent years a huge Extension Project was completed with the aid of the Protestant Central Agency for Development Aid, Bonn, and Federal Republic of Germany. With several additional buildings, an air conditioned operation theatre and intensive care unit, sophisticated equipment and highly qualified medical personnel, the hospital is much sought by the community several miles around. A significant development out of this hospital is St. Luke's Leprosarium at Peikulam (Estd. 1956) which has grown to be one of the foremost of its kind in the whole of India.

Recent additions to the medical ministry are the Hospitals at Maruthakulam, Tuticorin and Melapalayam. All these hospitals are manned by competent and dedicated medical staff, with whom alone they can fulfill the purpose for which they were founded.

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- <sup>1</sup> Amalorpavadass, D. S. *Theology of Indigenization*. Bangalore: National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1971.
- <sup>2</sup> C.B. Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History*. (Delhi: ISPCK Publishers, 1961), pp. 111.
- <sup>3</sup> M.K. Kuriakose, *History of Christianity in India* (New Delhi: ISPCK Press, 1982), pp. 321.
- <sup>4</sup> *The Constitution of the Christu Kula Ashram, Tirupattur, Extracts from Memorandum, Articles of Association and Bye-laws, Articles 1-9 only*.
- <sup>5</sup> Frank Buchman, *By His Friends*(London: Bland Ford Press, 1958) p.114.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Constitution of the Christu Kula Ashram, Tirupattur, Extracts from Memorandum, Articles of Association and Bye-laws, Articles 1-9 only*.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup>Thielicke Helmut, *Christ and the Meaning of Life* (New York: H&R Publishing 1962) p.16.
- <sup>10</sup> Warneck Gustav, *Outline of a History of Protestant Mission* , (London E&L Company) p.213.
- <sup>11</sup> Mark 8:34; Matt. 7:12; John12:24; 13:13-17, 34.
- <sup>12</sup> Some scholars claim that it was in the year 1938 when Saccidananda was founded. Cf. “Saccidananda ashram”, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saccidananda\\_Ashram](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saccidananda_Ashram) retrieved on December 23, 2012. However, according the authorities of the ashram, the ashram was “officially” founded on March 21, 1950. See Saccidananda, *Saccidananda Nama, A Commemorative Volume* (Tamil Nadu: Saccidananda Ashram, 2002), p.125
- <sup>13</sup> *Saccidananda Nama, A Commemorative Volume*, opt. cit., p. 5, End note #1.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Walter Fernandous, *Power Begins and Poverty in India* (The National Councils of Churches, n.a), p.28.
- <sup>16</sup> Some historians spell his name as “Bishop Herbert Bachen Ham Walsh” (cf. <http://www.indianorthodoxchurch.in/ashrams>, accessed on December 23, 2012). If this is the correct version, then perhaps, “Packenham” is its corrupted version.

## **CHAPTER 4**

# **THE CHRISTIAN ASHRAMS OF KERALA: THEIR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL CONTRIBUTION**

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### THE CHRISTIAN ASHRAMS OF KERALA: THEIR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL CONTRIBUTION

#### Christianity in Kerala

The history of Kerala goes back more than several millennia. Stone age carving in Edakkal Caves had pictorial writings believed to be dating to at least 5000 BC, from the Neolithic man, indicating the presence of a prehistoric civilization or settlement in this region. From as early as 3000 BC, Kerala had established itself as a major spice trade center. Kerala had direct contact across the Arabian Sea with all the major Red Sea ports and the Mediterranean ports as well as extending to ports in the Far East. The spice trade between Kerala and much of the world was one of the main drivers of the world economy. For much of history, ports in Kerala were the busiest among all trade and travel routes in the history of the world<sup>1</sup>.

Kerala region was ruled by the Chera Dynasty, which traded with the Greeks, Romans and Arabs as well as the Pandyan Empire were the traditional rulers of Kerala whose patriarchal dynasties ruled until the 14th century. The Cheras collapsed after repeated attacks from the neighboring Chola Empire and Rashtrakuta Empire. In the 8th century Adi Shankara was born in central Kerala, who travelled extensively across the Indian sub-continent and establishing institutions of Advaita Vedanta philosophy. Feudal Namboothiri Brahmin and Nair city-states subsequently gained control of the region<sup>2</sup>.

Contact with Europeans after the arrival of Vasco da Gama in 1498 gave way to struggles between colonial and native interests. In 1795, the area was under British dominion. After independence, the state of Kerala was created in 1956 from the former state of Travancore-Cochin, the Malabar district of Madras State.

The significant presence of West Asians—primarily traders—on the Malabar Coast has been recorded in many Roman and Tamil sources. They were encouraged to settle and set up trading outposts and factories by the local kings. Many migrations into Kerala were to escape religious or racial persecution. Jews of Kerala claimed to

be remnants of the Jews that left the northern Kingdom of Israel following the Assyrian invasion of 721 BC. The white Jews were refugees from Spain following the promulgation of the Edict of Expulsion.

#### The Role of St. Thomas

It is believed that Thomas the Apostle visited this region in 52 AD and preached Christianity among many enlightened Hindu Groups and Jewish people who lived in this region. Fruits of his efforts can still be felt through the existing Christian churches which trace their roots to his work. These Christians, often known as the Syrian Christians, are sometimes also known as Nasranis<sup>2</sup>.

Besides Thomas, history also talks about Mar Sabor and Mar Proth who also came to the region on the invitation of the Kollam King Kuleshakara. They arrived from Assyria in the 9th century AD and were the founders of the present Christian religion in Kerala shores independent from Vaishnavism. With the advent of Islam in West Asia the traders visiting Kerala's shores contained ever larger proportions of Muslims. Malik Iben Dinar created the first Muslim settlement in Kerala in the 7th century AD. Arab Muslims eventually dominated the sea trade with Kerala until the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century AD. As the Muslim settlers gained strength clashes erupted between them and the Christian and Jewish settlers in the 9th century AD. This resulted in Muslim control of trading centers in southern part of India.

#### **Christavashram**

Christavashram is one of the Christian ashrams found in Kerala. It is located in the city of Kottayam, a city that spreads over an area of 55.40 kmand is the administrative capital of Kottayam district. Kottayam is located in south-central Kerala. The city is approximately 150 km from the state capital, Thiruvananthapuram. It is at a place called Manganam that Christavashram is situated in this city.

Kottayam is an important trading center of spices and commercial crops, especially rubber. Major Kerala print media such as MalayalamPanorama, Deepika and Mangalam are headquartered in the town. Also a pioneering center of modern education in Kerala, the city became India's first city to achieve 100% literacy in 1989 and the district became the first tobacco free district in India on September 28, 2008.

The city of Kottayam is also known as *Akshara Nagari* (City of Alphabets) in honor of its contributions to print media and literature. The educational heritage of Kottayam is synchronized with the services of C.M.S. Missionaries. They have started schools and colleges besides their churches for all classes of people. After Independence of India, C.M.S. in India is known as Church Of South India and Church of North India. Kottayam has a place of honor on the cultural map of Kerala. The culture of Kottayam is influenced mainly by the large presence of the Seraing Christian community.

As mentioned earlier, elsewhere in this paper, the term 'ashram' means abode of a 'hermit'. In olden days, it was not uncommon to find religious gurus, rishis and enlightened votaries of various religious affiliations retreating to some secluded places, usually in the forests, away from the distractions and enjoyments of social life for meditational purposes. "Their principle was 'simple living and high thinking'."<sup>3</sup> 'Christavashram' means a "Christian ashram". It is an institution which uses ashram principles for Christian purposes. Relevant and necessary modifications in its structure and functions are made to achieve the Christian objectives.

'Manganam' where the ashram is located, is approximately 4 kilometers to the east from Kottayam town. Kottayam is the heart of mission and Bible activities with head-quarters of many Christian Churches and organizations located there. The Ashram is situated on a very picturesque hill with serene atmospheres.

Christavashram was founded in 1940 by Sash K.I. Matthau, Rev. J.P. Moothedath and K.K.Chandy. This was, as the ashram's constitution claims in its preamble, "in response to a ... call from God and following the starting of the Christian Institute in 1916 by Sash K.I. Mathai." Initially, it started out in 1934 as "Christavashram Group" and was then located at Alleppey. However, the group shifted to Manganam, near Kottayam in Central Travancore, in 1938 after purchasing their own land, 14 acres in size, through the aid of Miss I. A. Baker. However, formal organization of the ashram came about in 1940 following the passing of the constitution, the formation of an Advisory Board consisting of 14 persons interested in the development of the Ashram, Bishops, Clergymen and by people selected by the group from various Christian denominations in South India, and with the initiation of the three founder members.

Christavashram grew as a multi-pronged institution with regimentation and slowly ceased to be a movement of passionate adherence to ideals among men. The

various arms of Christavashram grew out of the fragile trunk that was born as a Retreat Centre in 1938 at Manganam. It was initially called as a Retreat center. Eventually it evolved into an Ashram. However retreat is still an integral activity of the ashram. Today, Christavashram is registered under Travancore Cochin Literacy, Scientific and Charitable Society Registration Act XXI of 1955.

### The Role of Acharya K.K. Chandy

K.K Chandy was born in 1908. A first born son of Koruth and Mariam of Kunnekkeril House, Karackal, Thiruvalla, Chandy had two brothers; K.K. Abraham who died in 1981 and K.K John of Boston University.

In 1934, Chandy met Sash K.I. Mathai and Rev. J.P. Moothedath with whom he co-founded Christavashram where he served as its Founder Secretary. Despite the conventional rules of celibacy which ashrams traditionally prescribe for its members, Chandy opted for married life and consequently, married Mary Kunjamma daughter of K.J. Cherian and Mariamma of Thiruvalla. His wife served as “sevak” in the Ashram and as ‘ammachi’ (grandmother or matron) to the Balagram children and the Ashram Community. She was great help to Acharya Chandy in all his activities.

### **Youth Christian Council of Action (YCCA)**

Besides being the co-founder of the Christavashram, Chandy was also a founder member and leader of the Youth Christian Council of Action which started in 1938 at the SCM Conference at Varkala. His role was found in helping in the mobilization of the Christian Community in non-violent ways against the dictatorship rule of the Diwan in the State.

### **Kerala Balagram**

Chandy also, during his tenure, initiated the establishment of “The Jubilee Home for Waifs and Stray Children” at Alleppey in 1937. When the ashram was shifted to Manganam in 1938 he founded The Kerala Balagram in 1939 at “Manganam Christavashram premises”<sup>4</sup> which later on merged with the Jubilee Home which by the way was also moved from Alleppey to Manganam.

The Balagram brings up and trains street boys and other destitute children, helping them grow in body, mind and spirit. It seeks to be a centre for research and

training to bring about a just and humanitarian -social order, where destitute and delinquent children are taken care of to help to mould them as responsible citizens.

Besides general education, vocational training is given to every child with the result that when he is discharged, he is in a position to earn a living and stand on his own legs financially and set up a home and family. Over 1200 children- have gone through the portals of the Balagram and are agriculturists, tailors, mechanics, drivers, teachers, engineers, doctors, clerks etc. Two colonies of old boys were started as extension centres at Kallar in Idukki district and Attappady in Palghat district to rehabilitate old boys. The Kallar colony is on a 50 acre plot on very fine land gifted by the Government in 1955. This was started under the initiative of Acharya Chandy.

#### Chandy's Social, Religious, Cultural and Political Involvements

In 1935 the All India Council of International Fellowship organized a special meeting for its members at Sevgram to which many other non-member but influential individuals in society were invited. Chandy was due to his active service towards the social good of society in Kerala was among the privileged few non-member who attended the fellowship. This visit and stay at Sevgram in 1935, helped to deepen his faith in truth and non-violence as the most effective means of social change and dynamic peace.

Upon his return to Kerala, Chandy called for several meetings with his colleagues in which he promoted and instilled the idea of the need to fight for freedom and independence. He especially promoted non-violent means to this end<sup>5</sup>.

#### **Representation to Nehru**

During the Sino-India war, when there was compulsory military training in Colleges, Chandy represented the matter to Prime Minister Nehru in 1964, on behalf of the Fellowship of Reconciliation through a memorandum. During the Interview, Chandy reminded Panditji of the stand of the Father of the Nation non-violence and urged him to withdraw compulsory nature of the N.C.C. The Prime Minister was sympathetic and it was withdrawn the next year<sup>16</sup>.

#### **Action on War and Atomic Disarmament**



Public meetings were organized by Chandy under the auspices of F.O.R and resolutions were passed urging nations and the U.N to stop manufacturing, testing and stockpiling of atomic weapons and to destroy existing stockpile. These resolutions were communicated to the National leaders and to the U.N Secretary General.

### **World Federalism and International Community**

Chandy was a Member of the Crusade for World Federal Community, led by men like Sir John Boyd Orr of which Nehru was also a Member. Chandy believed that the erosion of national sovereignty and or/national armies was necessary.

#### **Retreat Center**

Even though the first building of Christavashram was Retreat Center, they ventured on the Golden Jubilee Memorial. Retreat Center project which was nearly completed and several Christian movements, organizations, institutions and Church denominations are making good use of the Retreat Center for their spiritual advancement. This concerns God-word and man- word, dimensions of the religious aspect of Christavashram, Manganam, and Kerala<sup>6</sup>.

#### **Kerala Balagram**

'Balagram' literally means 'village of children'. The Annual Report of 1986-87 of Christavashram reads as follows.

The Kerala Balagram was started in 1934 with the name Jubilee Home, Alleppey by the Christavashram Group with 12 children from the streets of Alleppey. When the Ashram Group shifted its center of activities to Manganam, the Jubilee Home was also shifted thereto in 1937-38 and changed its name to Kerala Balagram. Boys are admitted, irrespective of cast creed backgrounds. More than a thousand children have passed through its portals. The Kerala Balagram seeks to give a home for destitute and delinquent children and to provide them with general education and vocational training, with a view to make them physically, mentally and morally fit to be responsible and self reliant citizens of the society.<sup>7</sup>

The general aim of the Kerala Balagram, as given in the preamble of its Byelaws is given below.

The institution aims at giving a home for waifs and strays by providing them with lodging, board and clothing and seeks to make them physically, mentally and morally fit to be useful members of society, by giving them training which would relate worship, work and art together in their day to day life, by introducing them to healthy pursuits according to their tastes and by giving them vocational training which would equip them to earn their living by honest labour. As the Ashram is a Christian body, the training given to the children will naturally be of a Christian

character. No attempt however is made to get the children afflicted to any religious denomination and a child's sentiments are respected in the matter of inherited religious and denominational loyalties<sup>8</sup>.

The Kerala Balagram gives training to the inmates in self governance through Balagram assembly. Panchayat members are elected at assembly meetings periodically. Balagram Vidyalaya, an Upper Primary School recognized by the Government, was started in 1983. The Nursery School, which admitted children from outside the Balagram, exists no more. The boys and resident staff work in the farm on campus on alternate days. The main crops are tapioca, banana, yam, beans, coconut, jack fruit, mango, pepper, et cetera.

Dairy Farming, Printing School, Binding School Commercial Institute (for type-writing), Tailoring School, Grinding Mill and Carpentry Work are some of the other off-shoots of Kerala Balagram.' In addition, cultural recreational and devotional activities are also conducted by the Balagram. The Garment Making Production Unit which was functioning in the eighties has come to a stand-still.<sup>13</sup> Health and Medical-Aids are given. After-care of the Old Boys (those who have left the Balagram) is undertaken. A Bio-Gas plant is attached to the Balagram. In general the Balagram concentrates on the socio-economic aspect of this Ashram.

### Lifestyle and Organization

Christavashram is organized and patterned after the gurukulu system of governance. In Indian concept a Guru is a teacher. But he occupies a position higher than an ordinary teacher. His stature comes somewhere between God and an ordinary teacher. Gurubhakthi or love and devotion towards the Guru mingled with fear out of reverence, was a bounden duty of a pupil in ancient India. It is like including 'love and devotion to God' as part and parcel of the 'fear of God'<sup>9</sup>.

“Kul”, “Kula” or “Kulam” means 'household' or 'extended' family. In the Gurukul system a pupil went to live with Guru and became a member of the household of the Guru. He did personal services to the Guru and in return learned from him. The curriculum was incidental and need based. The corporate life gave opportunities to learn how to respond to situations and to imbibe the moral and spiritual qualities of the Guru who expected to be exemplary.

The abode of the Guru was often called an Ashram and was the most coveted place in society. Gurus were Rishis. The finely clad kings used to come to the mud

houses of the Rishis and stand with awe, waiting for pieces of advice on governmental and personal matters<sup>10</sup>.

The Gurukul system does not confine education to particular areas. It embraces all aspects of life<sup>11</sup>. In short, an ashram is related to Gurukul system. The Gurukul system is related to an all-embracing education and training without the restrictions of specialization. An ideal Gurukul is not meant to produce a jack of all trades and master of none. Something about many things which is general knowledge and many things about some things which is special knowledge are to be combined and balanced.

### **Jesus Christ as Guru**

Just as a typical ashram has a guru who is looked up to for guidance and leadership, Christavashram, like many other Christian ashrams, recognizes Jesus Christ as its Guru. While on the Earth, Jesus Christ was considered as the greatest teacher and Guru by all his disciples. His teachings were often in parables (i.e. a form of story/tale). He used this method so that a common man could understand his messages. His followers believe that he was God and that through him divinity was revealed to humanity; the invisible glory in a visible human form (John 1:1-14)<sup>12</sup>. Men could learn of the unknown through the known; heavenly things were revealed through the earthly; God was made manifest in the likeness of men.<sup>13</sup> So it was in Christ's teaching; the unknown was illustrated by the known; divine truths by earthly things with which the people were most familiar. According to Christian teaching, when Jesus taught from nature, He was speaking of the things which His own hands had made, and which had qualities and powers that He Himself had imparted.

Thus Christians and Christian ashrams view Jesus as their example, and inspiration. To them, Christ is the sympathetic, compassionate Redeemer. Christ taught the Law of service to his disciples. Christ came to the earth "as He that serveth." Luke 22:27. Christavashram ashram has embedded all these principles, especially of service to others, which were taught by Christ<sup>14</sup>. K.I. Mathai, popularly known as Sash Mathaichan (*sadhu* means 'sage'), one of the founding members of Christavashram, Manganam who could be considered as the moving spirit of Christavashram at its inception, at the human level, often pointed out that Christ was the real Guru of the Ashram<sup>15</sup>.

Christ was truly in every sense of the word, a Guru. He had twelve regular disciples who lived with him, doing personal services to him and learning from his words, actions and lifestyle<sup>16</sup>. The only difference from a traditional guru, from the Indian point of view, as regards to a guru, is that Jesus had a mobile school which was not the case with the conventional Indian guru who normally sits in one place and people come to see him at his place. But that does not in any case negate the concept of Christ as a Guru.

### **Membership**

The members of the community of Christavashram includes, staff and children of the Kerala Balagram, staff and trainees of the Gurukul Ecumenical Institute and Peace Centre staying in the campus, and 30 Associate members living outside of the campus. The sources of income for the Community are its agricultural and dairy farms, and contributions from Associate members and friends. All members are committed to contributing 'Bread labour', and all earnings go to a common pool from where the needs of members are met. Any honorarium received either from the Ashram's own institutions or from outside also goes to the 'Common purse'.

### **Objectives of Christavashram**

In the constitution Christavashram is named as the society of St. Thomas. The motto of the society as appearing in the constitution is, 'Thy kingdom come.' The Ashram was established for the charitable or benevolent purpose of promoting the spiritual, moral and mental advancement of the members and others, and fostering and developing in them the spirit of service, and creating and affording fields and opportunities for such service with a view to relieving the wants and necessities of persons in need and generally assisting to establish peace, goodwill and love among people by:

1. Drawing people together by faith in and devotion to Jesus Christ, seeking to grow in the grace and knowledge of god as revealed in Jesus Christ, to witness to his message of the kingdom of God through worship, research, study, work and service.
2. By devotees of the Lord Jesus Christ of various denominational affiliations, living, worshipping, working and interceding together in the spirit of

Koinonia of the early Christian Church and by promoting efforts towards the reunion of the Churches especially by co-operating with ecumenical movements.

3. By encouraging promotion of celibate groups or orders in non-Roman Churches and by promoting religious community life of Christian families engaged in productive work and having all material goods shared in common according to need.

4. By spreading the Gospel in India and other countries especially among the educated and working classes through Ashram groups or training centers in co-operation with the Church or Churches, if any, in the respective are.

5. By working to bring about a just social and economic order assuring equality of opportunity and the fullest self expression to every individual.

6. By witnessing, to simplicity of living and to the dignity of manual labour by being engaged in bread labour such as agriculture, cattle farming and cotton weaving etc.

7. By being engaged in the ministry of reconciliation, by promoting non-violent action and by co-operating with the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Society of Friends and such other movements for peace and harmony.

8. By study and research in theology sociology and allied subjects and production of Christian literature thereon.

9. By fostering the prophetic ministry of the Church through study of current affairs in Church and state and issuing considered statements on the same.

10. By developing the Retreat House with its library to be the venue of devotional and study conferences, retreats etc., for vocational or other groups.

11. By running the Kerala Balagram, homes for destitute and delinquent children and by working to create public opinion towards tackling the problem of juvenile destitution and delinquency on a country wide basis.

12. By seeking to understand the special problems of youth and helping young people especially in finding their vocation and by running in finding their vocation, and by running youth conferences or participating in them, by organizing study groups or retreats Wand by co-operating generally with youth movements.

13. By engaging in other constructive national service by establishing and maintaining institutions of study, work and service such as schools or colleges, culture centers, homes for destitute, hostels, hospitals, rural centers, women and children

welfare centers etc., printing and publishing houses and by running papers or periodicals<sup>17</sup>.

## Christavashram in the 21st Century

### **Shift in Emphasis.**

A shift in emphasis as regards to the original vision, values and practices of Christavashram has been noted. There seems to be a departure from the conservative traditional overtones towards liberal ones. It is not difficult to trace this shift because it is reflected in the policies and theological statements made by the ashram itself. Following are a few examples of the areas in which this shift has been felt.

### **Celibacy**

Promoting celibacy for select groups was one of the initial objectives of the ashram Community<sup>18</sup>. This concerns the God ward dimension of the religious aspects of the Ashram. However, one since of the three founders of Christavashram opted for wedlock for personal reasons, the principle was lessened and since a precedent was set for all the later followers who would rather enjoy conjugal bliss. Consequently, with the demises of Job Achen (M.P. Job) and Sash Mathaichan (K.I. Mathai), celibacy, once a by-word of Christavashram became a non-available 'commodity' and has become a forgotten word now, except in the printed constitution<sup>19</sup>.

### **Evangelism**

Another objective of Christavashram is to spread the Gospel. This concerns the religious aspect of holistic ministry. But the problem is that the content of the Gospel is not given in the constitution. This allows room for everyone to give their own content to the Gospel as they like. Towards the end of his life P.T. Thomas, a member of Christavashram who popularized the Ashram among the public, through his involvement in the ministry of various Churches and organizations, said that more than social revolution what counts is each one's personal relationship with Christ.<sup>20</sup> This was a U-turn considering his earlier stand that social change through violent revolution if needed is the primary concern of every believer.<sup>21</sup>

### **Education**

Establishment of educational institutions is a declared objective of Christavashram<sup>22</sup>. This concerns the social aspect of Ashram. An upper primary school, vocational training in printing, binding carpentry, dairy farming, type-writing, agriculture, soap making and grinding were started.

However, the Nursery School and vocational training in soap making, composing, tailoring and weaving had to be discontinued. Sash Mathaichan expressed disillusionment' over the sad plight of Christian educational institutions with regard to the Governmental intervention.<sup>23</sup> He was speaking in connection with the cancellation of the religious instruction periods in C .M. S. College Kottayam in order to become eligible for grants from the secular Government which undertook to pay the fees of the lecturers and ministerial staff.' This was a change of outlook not long after the declaration of aims.

Left with the choice of running the educational institutions as unaided private concern or as aided institution wherein the salaries are paid by the government with strings attached, the Churches opted for the latter. The political decision of the Legislative Assembly of the Province is a reason for this shift. Such concern over the future of Christian educational institutions with regard to the aim of spreading the word is seldom heard during dialogues and addresses at the Christavashram.

### **Gandhism**

In the pre-independence era of India, Gandhism with its emphasis on non-violence, passive resistance, non-cooperation with the alien Government and Satyagraha had its heyday. Therefore Gandhism and pacifism lent itself into Christavashram's inception in the 1930's. It is not surprising that these ideals influenced the early leaders of the ashram.

Today in 2012, 65years later, the initial passion for Gandhism has lessened even in the political scenario. Though, as Tito Thomas rightly observes, "occasionally, through formal speeches and informal chats", K. K. Chandy has been instrumental in keeping the idea afresh, still that spirit is nowhere to be felt in the ashram itself<sup>24</sup>. In effect Gandhism is not affecting the world view and the consequent challenges in the life style of the Ashram as a whole. In other words this seems to be more of a lip service to Gandhism.

### **Hospitality**

During early years, outsiders visiting the Christavashram received personal attention in hospitality and care. This concerns the economic aspect of this Ashram. At present it appears that when needy people visit Christavashram for counseling, solace and guidance disunited, there is no warm hospitality extended from the inmates.

This problem could be a natural result of not having a celibate member among the elders of the Ashram community, unlike in the Sash Mathaichan of the early period. The family encumbrances take a heavy toll of the time of the elders. The practical difficulty prevents the elders from being available to uninvited guests any time of the day and night. Priority to family next to God is not wrong. But then it should not be at the expense of the declared idea as T.G. Joseph expressed that the change in the warmth of hospitality could be explained by the limitation of married state compared to celibacy<sup>25</sup>.

It is true that a family can be of help in showing hospitality in entertaining people with drink and meals but not in finding time to be available, to visitors, when compared to Celibates life. Personal and family considerations have caused strained relationships and lack of a peaceful atmosphere with the 'peace center' on Campus as a mute witness in the past.

### **Exclusivism**

Just as undue nationalism goes counter to international understanding and one-world idea, a community cannot be distinct unless there is some kind of exclusivism. However, exclusivism goes hand in hand with the possibility of superiority feeling and a 'Holier than thou' attitude.

K. K. Chand one of the founders of Christavashram has titled a book on the Christavashram as *A Quest for Community*<sup>26</sup>. According to the author, in this book, an ideal community could only spring from faith in God as Father of all mankind irrespective of race, class, caste nationality or culture<sup>27</sup>. He further states that such a community should not conform itself to the pattern of this present world. The idea is that on the one hand the community should distance itself from the world outside, and on the other hand see other communities, races, classes, castes, nationalities and cultures as one with it<sup>28</sup>.

It is clear that K.K.Chandy cannot have borrowed the idea of a Utopian classless society from the Bible than from Marxism. Otherwise, classes and ethnic



nations have come to stay (Rev 11:2, 9; 21:24). If we had a classless society and if no marriages hitherto were conducted with caste considerations many in India would not have been born. Consequently, the author surmises that God permitted caste differences to bring out innumerable particular precious souls!

The point is that it is not the existence of class that we ought to strive to banish from society but the wrong attitude to other classes. Thus, an ashram's exclusiveness is not wrong in itself, but the outworking of exclusivism should not lead to harm.

### **Ecumenism**

Christavashram has taken up the cause of ecumenism and lately it has become a banner of Christavashram. Ecumenism claims to achieve unity, not uniformity. The universal or invisible Church is already one and united, because it comprises of the believers in whom the Holy Spirit is indwelling permanently.

### **Contributions of Christavashram to Society**

#### **Social**

Christavashram is used for retreats and camps by individuals, families, cultural groups, church and ecumenical groups, as well as prayer and study group-meets for men, women, youth and students. There is a Conference hall and Dining hall, as well as Residential rooms and Dormitories. The Centre can accommodate up to 60 persons. Thus through the activities of this Retreat Centre, the ashram provides for the social needs of the area.

#### **Education**

Christavashram is a non-formal educational Centre, after the general pattern of the ancient Gurukulas of India. The Gurukul Ecumenical Institute and Peace Centre helps young men and women to choose their life work with a sense of vocation and call from God; experience practically a simple life style of Community living. The Gurukul promotes a non-violent life style and culture, peace education, nonviolent conflict resolution and reconciliation. The Gurukul also offers courses along with ongoing programs of camps, seminars, training, etc each year. The whole Institute is aimed at giving leadership training for working towards a just and peaceful social order based on the standards and values of the 'Kingdom of God'.

The ashram also has a woodworks institute at Bal-Tek (Woodworks Institute) where boys are trained in carpentry under a trained Instructor and a Foreman who works on the machines to give shape to the products. A Sevak of the ashram is giving time to develop it as an income earning production centre for the community.

## **KURISUMALA ASHRAM**

### Introduction

Kurisumala Ashram is a Cistercian Monastery in Syro-Malankara Catholic Church. It was founded and established near Vagamon, on March 21, 1958 by John Mahieu a Cistercian monk from the Scourmont Abbey, in Belgium who later on came to be known as Father Francis Acharya, in collaboration with Father Bede Griffiths, an English Benedictine monk.

John Mohieu came to Kerala in 1955 to start a Christian ashram at the invitation of Zacharias Mar Athanasios, the Bishop of Tiruvalla. In the course of time, Bede Griffiths joined him there. On 1st December 1956, the two of them started the new foundation at Tiruvalla in the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church. Eventually they were successful in obtaining 88 acres of land on 20 March 1958, the eve of St Benedict's day. Fr. Francis, Fr. Bede, and two seminarians traveled sixty miles to the site, high up on the holy mountain of Kurisumala. Well contented with their hilltop, they spent the next few months in a hut made of bamboo and plaited palm leaves with no facilities, no furniture, and a floor covered simply with cow dung. While the center of their lives was the prayer of the Church and celebration of its feasts and mysteries, they had to find a way of supporting themselves, so they soon started a dairy farm with cattle imported from Jersey.

John Mohieu had been touched and influenced to come to work in India by the life of Mahatma Gandhi whom he had met while he was studying in London in 1931. Gandhiji who had come for the Round Table Conference of the British Dominions had been contemptuously spoken of as a half-naked fakir, yet it was in his simple Indian dress that he led the delegates into Buckingham Palace for an audience with Queen Mary. The nobility of his character and the simplicity of his life deeply touched John Mahieu's heart. This influence prompted John to study the ancient culture of India to which he was from now on looking to as the land of Promise for him. He felt an inner call to a new life. In response to this conviction he travelled all over India to have a direct knowledge and experience of her people. He felt, as by

touch, the spiritual nature of India through learning, travelling and spiritual seeking. He visited and stayed in most of the great Ashrams of India.

'Kurusu' is the translation of the word "Cross", into Malayalam the language of Kerala, a small State in the South West tip of India; 'Mala' means mountain; 'Ashram' means "monastery". Hence, the name describes the community of monks who practice austerity and live a strict monastic life on the mount of the Cross in the high hills of Kerala.

However, Kurisumala ashram's inception can be traced back to 1950, the year when Abbe J. Monchanin (Swami Parama Arubi Annanda), a French missionary priest and H. Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda), a Benedictine monk, had founded the Christian way of life on the bank of river Kaveri, near Trichy (Tiruchirappally). Saccidananda Ashram was a Christian Ashram based on Indian spiritual tradition. John Mahieu, due to his interest in ashram life-style joined them and studied with them for a long time.

It was not until 1955, when after celebrating Christmas night in a small village that Zacharias Mar Athanasios, Bishop of Tiruvalla, a Syrian Catholic Church, invited Fr. Francis to make a monastic foundation in his diocese. It was quite providential that a few months later a gift of 88 acres of virgin land, in the Sahya Mountains was offered to him by Shri. K.V. Thomas Pottenkulam. Father Francis was then still alone but there was no delay in the fulfillment of his dream. Soon an English Benedictine monk offered to help him and, when they had settled on the land and built a small monastery for some twenty monks, in spite of the isolation and quasi-inaccessibility of the place, within three years, the community counted 15 members. At present they are 20; 16 'sannyasis', 1 'brahmachari' and 3 'sadhkas'.

### Organization and Operations

Kurisumala Ashram is a community of spiritual seekers who have become one in the spirit. The spiritual light of Kurisumala is the Acharya, the leader of seekers. As the spiritual leader of the ashram community the acharya is the final authority. There are twenty members who comprise Kurisumala ashram. Their acharya does not wish the number of members to exceed twenty. The members live a life of dedication to God and their neighbors. They ignore their own likes and dislikes. Five of them are priests. Ordination is given only when a priest is needed for Holy Eucharist and other sacramental ministries. He who is to receive ordination is

selected by Acharya. They depart from their house and family forever, there are no official home visits, but their families come to visit them at the ashram.

Acharya was not interested to develop the community into a monastic order. It is so, that the number of members is restricted. Several 'sannyasis' founded Ashrams in other parts of Kerala, in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, some who were members of this Ashram joined the Missionaries of Charity of Mother Teresa, working in leprosy colonies and homes for mentally handicapped. But, with a view to assure the future of the community they sought affiliation with Acharya's former monastic order and were officially incorporated in the order of the Cistercians of the Strict.

### Features

The most important feature of Kurisumala is its silence which truly pervades the Ashram. The silence is broken there only by the sweet sound of wind and birds which bring a quasi-divine message. The sadhakas listen to the whisperings of the spirit. They claim that through this silence they experience '*aanandamaya*', that sense of full of joy which concentration of prayer brings about. All beings originate from Annanda, joy. They live in Annanda and they return to Annanda. Gandhiji said: 'Experience teaches that silence is the strength of all seekers of truth'<sup>29</sup>.

These words of Gandhiji, and the Indian monastic life-style prompted Acharya to give an important place to silence in the Ashram. He keeps day silence. Rock-hewn caves, solitary hermitages and trees, which recall to the mind of Buddha's enlightenment, favour meditation. It is a divine experience offered to visitors to participate in the sadhakas asceticism and contemplation through communion with nature. They welcome people of all, because even the guests who come from far and near pray with 'the Harp of the Spirit', and expand or Koinonia, our communion to the four quarters of the earth'.

Kurisumala is a mountain from where milk and honey are flowing. Honey is found in the rocky clefts of this mountain, where bees make their hives. The means by which the monks make their livelihood is the breeding of cows. About 100 families live by breeding milk cows in co-operation with the Ashram farm. Milk collected here and distributed in the plains. Thus, the milk which is needed for the spiritual and bodily growth benefits people who live in the cities.

Acharya received the formula of bread-labour from Gandhiji who taught that in every work there is glory. They spend about five hours daily for cultivation, cooking and keeping the house. The monks who consider food as God's gift do not allow even guests to waste food. A share is always given to the poor. The place where the monks, who have been called to the presence of the heavenly Father rest, is on the top-most area of the land, called 'Resurrection Garden'.

Swami Dharmanad Giril, long associated with the Ramakrishna Mission spoke about the last seven years of his life which he spent at Kurisumala. "I came as a stranger and took me in. Their activities impressed me as a life of all for one, and one for all, proclaiming both the dignity of labour and the greatness of the spiritual quest." It is for this experience that many people from different religions and life situations come to this Ashram where they find peace. 'I once stayed with Cistercian monks. They are votaries of divine love, of poverty and chastity. Their monastery was a veritable garden. There was a sweet silence pervading the whole atmosphere. I still live under the charm of their chills. It would be ideal to found such an institution."<sup>30</sup>

#### Day-to-Day Life

The day to day life at Kurisumala ashram includes meditation and devotion, study and service in life. A day is divided almost equally in hours for prayer, study, work and rest. Prayer starts at 4.00 a.m. in the morning. As was common in the early monastic tradition they maintain the spirit of prayer in the various works of the day. Satsang, in the evening is a common feature in Indian Ashrams long practiced at Kurisumala. This is an occasion for a, monks and guests, to join more freely in bhajans and spiritual songs. The traditional Upasana meditation, consisting in sravana, the inner listening, manana, the active reflection, and nididhasana, the contemplative concentration is also used. The Sadhakas, who recite all the day, Om Shri Yesu Bhagavate Namah (I bow before you, Jesus) in their heart and on their lips, pray to that beloved: Om, Lokah Samastha and Sukhino Bhavantu', (Om, May the entire world be happy!). The formation of the sadhakas takes place in the community with the help of the experienced senior members. The values of Kurisumala Ashram are: Silence, Solitude, Meditation, Simplicity, Manual work, Inter-religious dialogue and harmony, Indian Christian Spirituality and Vegetarian Food.

## Fields of Activity

Kurisumala Ashram is not a clerical community. The principal activity of the Community of Kurisumala is the monastic charisma. Its temporal needs are met by the dairy farm which makes it self-supporting. Many families have settled near the Ashram, some of them on land donated by the community. Almost a hundred local families are supported by the Ashram by accepting milk from them at a good price, supplying medicines to the under-privileged and offering guidance. The farm is a source of jobs and financial help for many others. A medium-sized vegetable garden and a small bakery managed by the brothers provide vegetables and bread for the community's consumption.

The Benedictine - Cistercian tradition lays great emphasis on hospitality, 'receiving each visitor as Christ Himself.' In the Indian tradition, too, reception of guests has been given a prominent place. No wonder, then, that Kurisumala Ashram, where both these traditions merge, is well known for the warm welcome it extends to people from every cross-section of society. There are buildings for male and female guests and hermitages for those who prefer more solitude. Those who come for a stay are given the opportunity to share in the prayer services and life of the community, to the extent allowed by the rules of enclosure. They are expected to give a helping hand 'Ashram seva' by participating in household chores, vegetable-cutting and the like. Every aid and help for deeper prayer is made available, including priestly ministry, spiritual guidance. Guests can avail themselves of the library facilities, opening the eyes of their mind to the Written Word, or go for a quiet stroll through the lush surroundings, inclining the ear of their heart to the Word revealed in nature. The church, open round the clock, is a place for silent prayer and reflection where they can re-charge their batteries' and contemplate their Creator in the cave of their hearts. The guest-book at the Ashram bears words of gratitude and praise for this 'Kurisumala experience' whereby many have experience '*El-Shaddai*', the God of the mountain.<sup>31</sup>

Another important work in Kurisumala Ashram is the publication and distribution of religious classics, Bibles and other books. Pride of place goes to the four-volume set, 'Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit', translated from Syriac by Francis Acharya; the publication of a Malayalam translation of the gem of Eastern Christian spirituality.

A visitor to the Ashram may be surprised by this apparent 'busyness of the monks. Nevertheless, like the tranquil 'eye' in the middle of a cyclone, there lies, at

the core of these activities, something that transcends the mundane realities of life. As a matter of fact, they give expression to the ashramites' heart-felt desire and prayer that the Ashram becomes a spiritual haven in the Church, a beacon of hope for the heart-broken, a haven for the children of God.<sup>32</sup>

Kurisumala's incorporation into the Cistercian (Trappist) Order has added a new dimension to its Gandhian touches. The Mahatma's admiration for the Order is very much in evidence in this remark made after a visit to a monastery in South Africa: "I once stayed with Cistercian monks. They are votaries of divine love, of poverty, of chastity. Their monastery was a veritable garden. There was a sweet silence pervading the whole atmosphere. I still live under the charm of their cells. It would be my ideal to found such an institution."<sup>33</sup>

### Spiritual Objectives

Monastic life is something common to the great religious traditions of the world. In India, it originated centuries before Christianity. And yet, it is well and truly a mystery, a spiritual reality that eludes clear explanation. What follows is just an overview of what monastic life is all about, and, more specifically, how it finds expression at Kurisumala Ashram.

What is monastic charisma? Simply put, it is to seek God with an undivided heart. This calls for a radical renunciation of everything that clamours for the heart's attention and tends to divide it. A Christian monk renounces home, possessions, marriage, the 'world' and ultimately himself in order that he may possess Christ and, in turn, be possessed by Him and eventually be transfigured into His likeness. Though separated from the world by his renunciation, he nevertheless remains united with all in Christ, as Evagrius, one of the Church fathers, has so rightly said. 'In order to be truly ourselves, we must find ourselves in Christ—which can only be done if we lose ourselves in Him. This is our great vocation' says Thomas Merton, the famous Cistercian author, of a monk's self-emptying, or kenosis effected through his renunciation.<sup>34</sup>

### Ancient Tradition at Kurisumala

Ancient tradition manifests itself at Kurisumala in three distinct strands; the three charisms of Kurisumala, as Francis Acharya like to call them:

## **Syrian Liturgy**

An oriental and essentially poetic liturgy deeply rooted in the thought and language of the Bible, with a vivid sense of the resurrection.

## **Indian Monastic Lifestyle**

Inculturated, simple, nature-oriented and austere.

## **Benedictine-Cistercian Spirituality**

It is based on the Cistercian interpretation of the Rule of St. Benedict, with its emphasis on community prayer, manual labor and Lectio Divina (meditative, prayerful, spiritual reading).<sup>35</sup>

Syrian liturgy is replete with poems by the likes of St. Ephrem—aptly named ‘Harp of the Holy Spirit’—and Jacob of Serugh. These poems are notable for their symbolic excellence, richness of imagery and ability to elevate the believer's hearts. These devotional poems and the predilection of the Syrian tradition for austerities and closeness to nature make it ideal for an Indian setting. The Syro-Malankara Qurbana celebrated on Sundays and feast days, the Bharatiya Pooja on weekdays, the hymns sung at the regular prayer services, the bhajans and keertans sung at the Satsang. The saffron robes and bare feet of the sannyasis, the colorful copes used during Qurbana, the vegetarian diet and sparse furnishings are all concrete manifestations of this 'marriage' between the Syrian and Indian traditions effected at Kurisumala.

In the Benedictine-Cistercian tradition, the monastic vocation is pursued in a monastery under a Rule and an Abbot. Bound by vows of stability, fidelity to the monastic way of life (which includes poverty, chastity, simplicity and all other monastic practices) and obedience, the monks follow a life in community modeled on the early Church of Jerusalem. Drawing nourishment from the Holy Eucharist and the spiritual riches of the prayers of the Church celebrated in the liturgy of the hours, they dedicate themselves to a life that is 'ordinary, obscure and laborious', a life of faith, hope and love.

Day in and day out, they strive towards the ideal of unceasing prayer—“Lokah samastha,” or prayer for the world, “sukkino bhavanthu” or prayer for the unity of the Churches and “Om shanty, shanty, shanty”, prayer for peace



<b>July 1955</b>	Fr. Francis Acharya arrives in Bombay
<b>September 1955</b>	Fr. Francis begins year-long stay at Saccidananda Ashram (Shantivanam) in Tamil Nadu with its founders Fr. Jules Monchanin and Fr. Henri le Saux OSB.
<b>November 1956</b>	A small community was established at Pushpagiri, Tiruvalla, in the company of Fr. Bede Griffiths OSB under the authority of Zacharias Mar Athanasios, Bishop of Tiruvalla.
<b>November 3, 1957</b>	Mar Athanasios signs Constitution establishing a contemplative monastery.
<b>March 21, 1958</b>	Kurisumala Ashram established at Vagamon.
<b>September 14, 1958</b>	Ashram Church Consecrated and the first three novices clothed in the monastic habit.
<b>August 6, 1968</b>	Fr. Francis Shashitiabdapurti celebrated, becomes Indian citizen.
<b>August 28, 1968</b>	Fr. Bede Griffiths departs from Kurisumala and takes charge of Shantivanam Ashram.
<b>October 1996</b>	In the Company of Geevarghese Mar Timotheos, Bishop of Tiruvalla, Fr. Francis attends the Cistercian (Trappist) General Chapter held in Rome. He makes a request for the incorporation of Kurisumala Ashram into the Order.
<b>July 9, 1998</b>	Official incorporation of Kurisumala Ashram into the Cistercian Order.
<b>October 14, 1999</b>	Fr. Francis blessed as Abbot
<b>January 31, 2002</b>	Fr. Francis departs to the heavenly homeland.
<b>March 20, 2002</b>	Fr. Yesudas blessed as the second Abbot of Kurisumala.
<b>January 31, 2008</b>	Joint Commemoration of Acharya's 6 <sup>th</sup> death-anniversary and Golden Jubilee of Kurisumala Ashram.

## Prayer at Kurisumala Ashram

‘Let our prayer be a mirror, Lord, placed before Your face then your fair beauty will be imprinted on its luminous surface.’ (St. Ephrem)

## **Divine Retreat Center (Potta) Ashram**

### Introduction

The Divine Retreat Center or Potta Ashram is a ‘Catholic’ Charismatic Renewal Ashram in Muringoor on the banks of the Chalakudy River 6 km. from Potta in Kerala, India. Potta is a tiny village about 30 miles north of Kochi - also known as Cochin, a city in south India.

Since 1950, the Vincentian Fathers have been conducting Popular Mission Retreats in parishes in Kerala, India<sup>36</sup>. Potta Ashram was founded in 1977 as the Popular Mission Center “to direct and to co-ordinate popular mission retreats”.<sup>37</sup> The directors of the Center, Fathers, George Panackal and Romulus Nedumchalil, used to conduct Popular Mission retreats and visitations from there and they also made it their residence and headquarters. A few years later, father Mathew Naickomparambil was transferred to Potta.

In the late 1980s, during his intense search for God, Fr. Mathew Naickomparampil started a prayer group at Potta local church. Here, he received several divine revelations and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Later, that prayer group became one of the most powerful ministries in the world. Through this ministry, thousands have been led to faith in Jesus; numerous people continue to be anointed as preachers of the Word of God and several retreat centers have been opened throughout India. In all these retreats and conventions, preachers and evangelists share and proclaim The Word of God. It is a truth that God ‘confirms His word’ in these places by showering abundant blessings on the participants through miracles, healing and transformation of lives. Occasionally, Fr. Mathew and other members of the Divine team conduct retreats and Bible conventions in various parts of the world.

Besides, Father Matthew Naickomparambil was involved in propagating the Charismatic Renewal. Father George Panackal became impressed by Naickomparambil's sermons which were the result of his involvement in the Charismatic Renewal. Naickomparambil's propagation of the Charismatic Renewal

drew in thousands of people. After a few years a three storey building was put up to conduct the retreats, primarily intended for the people coming to the Ashram for further consultations from places where the Vincentians' Popular Mission Retreats were being conducted. But as Naickomparambil's Charismatic Renewal retreats grew in popularity, the Potta Ashram itself became a center for numerous retreats. Consequently, the Potta Ashram facility was inadequate for the increased numbers. As a result of this, under Fr. George Vempilly, the new director, a sprawling new site was acquired at Muringoor, on the banks of the Chalakudy River, six kilometers away from Potta. Father Jacob Athickal was tasked with preparing a new and more extensive facility. This was given the name of Divine Retreat Center, and as inaugurated in 1987. At this new site, as increasing numbers visited, retreats were begun in six other languages besides Malayalam: English, Konkani, Kannada, Telugu, Tamil and Hindi.

However, conceptionary, the Divine Retreat Center has its origins in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal began in 1966 at the Duquesne University in the U.S.A. and was imported into India by Mino Engineer, a Parsee (Zoroastrian) who married a Hispanic American, Luz Maria, and 'converted;' husband and wife have together spread this ideology in India.

True, as Isaiah puts it, 'Even youth grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint,'<sup>38</sup> in spite of the many and sundry challenges and obstacles, father Matthew encountered his initiative successfully.

#### Activities of the Charismatic Renewal in India

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal is a movement within the Catholic Church. Worship is characterized by vibrant Masses, as well as prayer meetings featuring prophecy, healing and 'praying in tongues.' This movement is based on the belief that certain charismata bestowed by the Holy Spirit, such as the abilities to pray in tongues and to heal should still be practiced today.

A charismatic style of prayer is common at Christ the King. People are free to raise their hands in prayer and during songs; many pray their own prayers audibly. They pray with expressive or charismatic prayer at monthly parish prayer meetings, at the beginning of parish meetings, and most especially during certain moments in the

Holy Mass. These are some of the external markers of a charismatic parish. Internal markers include a radical surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all parts of life, a strong adherence to the Gospel and the teachings of the Catholic Church, and the pursuit of strong friendships centered on Christ.<sup>39</sup>

### **Expansion**

The Potta Ashram quickly set up branches in other cities and regions of India, including one in the Chembur suburb of Bombay (St. George's Ashram, Chembur), and Tabor Ashram near Kalyan, an ancient city to the immediate east of Bombay (Tabor Ashram). Today, the Divine Retreat Center is allegedly the largest retreat center in the world. Since 1990, over 10 million pilgrims from all over the world have attended retreats here. Weekly retreats are held back-to-back non-stop every week of the year.

### **Hope for the Abandoned**

The Divine Retreat Centre (DRC), an organization in India, is the axis on which many lives revolve. Every day, thousands of abandoned people cry out for a place to live, three meals a day, someone they can call family, skills to procure them a job and hands to fold for them in prayer.

The Divine Retreat Centre, located in the southern tip of India's Kerala state has been a place of solace for many from all parts of the country since 1989. Vincentian priests and volunteers from around the country help preach the word, educate the young, care for the elderly, feed the hungry and offer support to the sick and the disabled.

The director of the centre, Fr Augustine Vallooran, says it all began in prayer in 1991.

“We got a Bible verse, Matthew 25:40 — ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me (Mathew 25:40)’. God was asking us to serve millions as they served Him. That weekend, our volunteers found two elderly persons abandoned by their families. The two women suffering from acute kidney failure were accepted into the Divine family — that was how the Vincentians started the Divine Mercy Home for the Aged, a home for the elderly.”

Today, the centre has two homes for the aged — the Mercy Home and the Maria Shanthi Bhavan — where residents are cared for round the clock by a dedicated staff of nuns and attendants.

For the younger women DRC set up the St Mary's Home for Abandoned and Destitute Women which helps young mums find a job within the campus and earn a living. A full-time crèche takes care of the toddlers while their mums are at work. The women and their babies have survived poverty, abuse and neglect in their families. More than 300 of them have been helped so far.

At DRC's homes for children, abandoned children with stories of broken homes, alcoholic parents, starvation, poverty and strife look on the positives. The Samaritan's home has children ages 3 to 17. Children study in a school run by DRC. They are given safety and a roof over their heads lest they begin to call the streets their home. While child prostitution and illegal work are victimizing many all over the country and many never learn to read or write, these young ones are cared for by DRC as their own. They are helped to live their lives like children.

DRC's dream of opening a home for the mentally ill became a reality in 2001. Bernard Nigli has been one of its residents for the past eight years. He has worked for Ford Motor in Australia and hotels in Abu Dhabi. After struggling with acute schizophrenia for years, Nigli has now found a home.

'The reality of having about 2,000 mentally deranged people wandering around in the campus of Potta Ashram. Fr Vallooran says.' What we practice here is love therapy. Volunteers and inmates interact with others, the people here pray together. None of these people need sedation to sleep today. Daily activities include newspaper reading and yoga. Eight nurses, doctors and therapists care for these people in the age group of 25 to 80. So far 125 inmates have been sent home.

DRC's institution for the mentally ill named Santhipuram Care Centre today has a waiting list of 5,000. The centre's bakery is run by inmates who have been healed. The one thing that bothers the staff and the religious there is that many of these people are healed, but their families do not want them back. 'Many of these people were brought here by their families and once their parents pass away, their siblings do not want them back.' The Divine Deaddiction Centre, a government-approved home, helps people who have been fighting a losing battle with cigarettes, alcohol and drugs was brought to the centre by his friends in a wasted state.

DRC also provides free meals at the local hospital. There is a self-employment scheme for poor uneducated youth, a Bible college and a dairy farm. And not one person who turns to the centre is sent away empty-handed. Thousands come every week to the largest Catholic retreat centre in the world. Every day 3,000 persons turn to the DRC for their daily bread.

The home which offered them comfort today has several HIV-positive men and women surviving the hard knocks of life through prayer and love in Potta Ashram.

### **Divine Retreat Centre, Muringoor, Kerala**

The Divine Retreat Centre is popular world over. Hundreds of thousands of people of all races, religions, and ages, and from different countries, attend the retreat programmes at DRCM, learning the true meaning of life.

The Divine Retreat Centre is dubbed as the largest Catholic retreat centre in the world. Over 10 million pilgrims from all over the world have attended retreats at the center since it started in 1990. It was started out as a preaching ministry but now runs dozens of social projects to help the poor and a media ministry.

#### **Contributions of Divine Retreat Centre to Society**

Potta ashram has since the day of its inception contributed significantly to the communities surrounding its jurisdiction not only in the spiritual spheres of their life, but also in education, social and economic spheres as well. A number of people irrespective of their respective religious orientations have benefited from these services which are made by this ashram

#### **Education**

Potta ashram has a “free education scheme for orphans and street children”.<sup>40</sup> At the time of this research, the ashram boasted of 250 beneficiaries of this scheme from the community who were being educated by the ashram.

#### **Social**

On the social side, Potta ashram has a number of activities which it carries out to meet the various social needs of the people in its catchment area. These include,

provision of free meals to the hungry and street children, needy patients admitted in nearby government hospitals. Every week about 700 meals are provided to such needy people.<sup>41</sup>

Besides feeding the needy and street children, Potta ashram also provides shelter for widows and orphans who do not afford a home of their own and the poor in general. About 150 women and 300 children are already benefiting from this service as of February, 2013 when the interview for this research was being carried out and a total of 3000 people were permanently housed under this scheme at the ashram<sup>42</sup>. It is only fitting that the ashram is considered as “a Home away from Home” for many needy and people.<sup>43</sup>

Further, the ashram provides free housing for the aged men and women who have been neglected by their families due to terminal illnesses or old age. A special program called “Divine Mercy Home and Maria Santi Bhavan” is thus run to cater for this specific need.

## **Health**

Health is one of the fundamental needs of human beings. Not only does it affect the economy of society but it also affects the spirituality of the people and the church at large.<sup>44</sup> Realizing this relationship between the two, Potta ashram has taken the initiative to promote good health among the people of its communities. In this effort, the ashram provides special service to the mentally challenged, depressed, and the chronically ill from various ailments including victims of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Nearly “450 mentally ill” persons, rejected by the community at large and their own families were at the time of this research being cared for by the ashram.<sup>45</sup> In 1997 the ashram opened a special home for HIV/AIDS patients which at the time of this research was having “85 adults and 13 children”.<sup>46</sup> These patients receive “expert medical care provided by a dedicated team.”

The ashram also has a de-addiction centre where addicts of alcohol and other drugs are brought for treatment and de-addiction exercises. Every week about a 150 addicts are reportedly benefiting from this service on which the ashram claims a success of 80 percent.<sup>47</sup>

## **Spiritual**

Besides offering retreats to people for spiritual devotions, the ashram also provides free spiritual counseling to people. Weekly retreats in seven languages: Malayalam, English, Hindi, Tamil, Konkani, Kannada, and Telugu are held for such spiritual exercises.

To cater for the spiritual needs of young people and need for guidance, the ashram also runs prayer small groups not only bible studies are held, but also free spiritual counseling is made available to the youth from all corners of the country. A Bible college was established in 1998. Young people and many others, interested in studying the word of God are admitted and trained in how to study and share the Bible messages with others.

### **Economic**

In addition to the foregoing contributions towards society, Potta ashram also both directly and indirectly contributes to the economic statuses of its respective surrounding communities. Directly, the ashram offers employment to a substantial number of people who work in the various departments and programs it runs. For instance, the ashram's "Divine Printers and Publishers" employs "nearly 400 people".<sup>48</sup>

The ashram also owns "St. De Paul Tailoring School" which imparts practical tailoring skills to roughly 300 girls yearly<sup>49</sup>. Thus through this school self-employment opportunities among girls are enhanced just as this act simultaneously is the ashram's contribution towards gender imbalance challenges which are still affecting the 21 century world.

Through its free education scheme, Potta ashram is also indirectly helping in alleviating poverty and providing opportunities to the children of the communities around its jurisdiction to acquire necessary skills to attain employment. Thus the ashram is a key partner with the Indian government in lifting the lives of the people.

## **BETHANY ASHRAM**

### **History of Bethany Ashram**

The purpose of establishing Bethany Ashram was to imitate Jesus Christ by the perfect observance of evangelical counsels of obedience, chastity, through community life. Imitation of Christ means following Jesus Christ in his life of prayer and action through meditation and to realize in monastic tradition and Indian



sanyasam in ancient time. The simple life of Jesus who lived always in prayer and went on doing good to all. Bethany means house of consolation. Ashram is the abode of a sanyasi where a strenuous effort for God experience is made in Prayer, Silence, Simplicity and Hard work.

All Christians are called to share the life giving and salvific mystery in which Lord Jesus lived. Jesus presented himself as an offering and sacrifice which he continued through the church. He calls all to perfection saying “Be Perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Bethany Ashram not only gives importance to prayer and meditation life but also love for manual labour, mutual love, cooperation and the spirit of service within the community. According to the eastern monastic and Indian sanyasi traditions hospitality is a religious virtues response to this Ashram. Bethany in mix welcomes whole heartedly whoever comes to their place to seek peace, spiritual guidance and consolation. Bethany Ashram adopted life of prayer from Luke 6:12 says “ Jesus went out to the mountain to pray” in this Ashram prayer life is very much emphasized reading Holy Qurbana and spending one hour everyday in meditation, as well as fasting and abstinence is observing to keep perfect in life. According to this Ashrams aims and objectives is silence and solitude which strengthens prayer life.

Bethany Ashram was founded by Fr. P.T. Geevarghese Panickaruveettiil, who later became Archbishop Mar Ivanios on August 15, 1919 at a place called Perunad, Ranni. Bethany Ashram was the first monastic community in the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church at that time with a unique vision and life-style. The founder Mar Ivanios O.I.C aimed at bringing together the monastic ideals of the Christian East and Indian Sanyasam in a particular life-style which was actualized in a life of intense prayers and apostolic activities. The name Bethany Ashram itself points to this fact. Simple and austere life, atmosphere of intense prayer and solitude, saffron (*Kavi*) habit, vegetarian food, life in common etc, were some of the basic features of this life style<sup>30</sup>.

Soon after its foundation, Bethany Ashram became the pilgrim centre of the Malankara Church giving solace to the spiritually starved people. In 1930, most of its members joined their founder on his way to Catholic Church and Bethany Ashram remained the cradle of the historic Reunion Movement. This event ushered in a new era in the life and growth of Bethany Ashram. The members were initially confined to the activities directly related to Reunion Movement. But later, along with that, began

to undertake a wide range of apostolic activities with an 'All India Missionary Vision'.

In 1966 the Congregation was raised to Pontifical Status. On 24 April 2000, two provinces were erected in the Congregation - Bethany Navajeevan Province and Bethany Navajyothy Province. Bethany Ashram Pune is the Major Seminary of the Congregation. Bethany Vedavijnan Peeth in Bethany Ashram Pune is an Institute of Oriental Studies that caters to the theological formation of the Seminarians.

#### Activities at Bethany Ashram

The following are the apostolic activities of the Bethany Congregation:

- a. Preaching the Gospel, conducting retreats, teaching Catechism and giving spiritual instructions for the renewal of the Church.
- b. Ecumenical activities and inter-religious dialogue.
- c. Mission and parish activities taken up according to the needs of the Malankara Church.
- d. Missionary activities aimed at the evangelization of India.
- e. Apostolic activities undertaken according to the need of the Universal Church.
- f. Social apostolate.
- g. Apostolate through communication media.
- h. Educational activities.

#### Provinces

There are two provinces of Bethany Ashram, Navajeevan and Navajyothy.

#### **Bethany Navajeevan College**

Through the administration of Bethany Navajeevan Province, Bethany Ashram owns and runs a College of Physiotherapy known as the Bethany Navajeevan College. The aim of the ashram in running this college is to achieve and endorse excellence in every area of its teaching, maintaining and developing its position as a world-class institution to enrich international, national and regional communities through the skills of its graduates and provide excellent education affordable to all.

In line with this, Bethany Navajeevan College of Physiotherapy provides the facilities and support for its staff to take up innovative methods of teaching in

accordance with the developments in the academic world and also take care of the developments in industry and commerce.

The institution continues to improve the quality of the course that prepares our students for professional life, leadership and citizenship in a changing world. The college aims at attracting students of the highest caliber from India and abroad and remaining as a leader in the creation, synthesis and spread of knowledge beneficial to the current and forthcoming generations.

Bethany Ashram has been in the field of Education for over eight decades. This religious community is founded by the great educationalist and visionary late Archbishop Mar Ivanios. Having established schools, industrial training institutions, and other educational institutions, it has produced a set of core values that underline all aspects of its present and future programmes.

Bethany Navajeevan College of Physiotherapy was a pioneer institution in the University of Kerala creating professional in the field of Physiotherapy. The Infrastructure blended with the state-of-the-art technology facilities in all divisions amidst the tranquility of Nalanchira calls for the best brains from the country and abroad to pursue their dreams. Bethany Navajeevan College of physiotherapy aims to create a hallmark through its learning methodologies incorporating new initiatives in the field of education. All efforts are taken to enable students with various backgrounds to instill confidence in them to face the fierce competition lying ahead and refining true professionalism in them. The course is affiliated to University of Kerala and recognized by the Para Medical Council of Kerala. Affiliation assures the student that the Institution operates on a sound financial basis, has a program of student, employees qualified faculty members, has adequate facilities and equipment, users approved recruitment and admission policies and advertises its courses truthfully.

Bethany Navajeevan College of Physiotherapy has ensured dedicated, talented, experienced teachers who motivate and energize the students to achieve the best. The faculty members are top class working professionals and retired hands from the Medical College of Kerala with extensive real life work experience in the workplace. Faculty members genuinely follow every student and care about their progress.

Bethany Navajeevan College of Physiotherapy with the motive of eliminating unemployment always creates thinking professional, and strives in the path of

perfection and upgrading with the latest technologies and methodologies to provide quality education. The institution owes its existence to the management and its growth to the students.

### **Bethany Navajyothy Province**

Bethany Navajyothy Province comprises a total of 291 ashramites: 2 Bishops, 138 Priests, 10 Religious Brothers, and 141 students. There are 8 Mission Mandirams: Kolkata, Kalayapuram, Kanjiramkulam, Pinkulam, Hyderabad, Ludhiana, Delhi and Angamoozhy. The Ashram also runs three Boys' Homes at Vencodu, Kokkathode and Hyderabad.

#### **Educational and Health Institutes:**

Besides, the Ashram also runs educational institutes at the following places: Commercial Institute – Nedumangadu, Nature Cure Centre – Nalanchira, HRD Centre – Santhigiri, Cancer Care Centre (Grace) – Nalanchira, Pain & Palliative Care (Grace) – Santhigiri, and Holistic Health & Counseling Centre – Palayam.

#### Schools run by Bethany Navajyothy Province

### **Girideepam Business School**

Girideepam Institute of Advanced Learning (GIAL) is the higher education segment of Girideepam Institutions. It is owned and managed by the Bethany Navajyothy Province of the Order of the Imitation of Christ (Bethany Ashram). The School of Management Studies with the slogan 'In Pursuit of Excellence' aims in developing ethical, entrepreneurial and socially responsible managers.

GIAL, located in the 'City of Letters' is the one and the only management school in the heart of the town, enabling easy access to the campus for the students. The GIAL campus is only 3 kilometers from Kottayam Collectorate, eastward along the NH 220 (K.K. Road). The serene campus of 30 acres of land provides a truly conducive atmosphere for the students, inspiring creativity for higher education.

The MBA Program of the School of Management Studies of GIAL is approved by AICTE, Delhi and affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi University. The teaching pedagogy at GIAL, followed by the faculty with their professional

experience aims at grooming not merely good, but great managers of indefatigable confidence and capable of steering the affairs to their desired and defined destination. The importance given to the inculcation of soft skills is another brand mark of GIAL education system. GIAL also has a systematic training program aimed at developing the personality of the students.

A series of programs essential for management professionals are conducted with the assistance of external experts who will be involved in sharpening the skills in communication, interpersonal relationships, analytical ability, proficiency in public speaking, assertiveness, self-confidence, interview techniques etc. The placement cell functioning at GIAL ensures the most opportune placement for all the students who pass out of our institution commendably. The faculty members will meet the students collectively and individually and offer workshops and programmes in areas like job search, preparation for job interviews and salary negotiations. Highlights of Girideepam Business School are Competent faculty with industry experience, Collaborate with reputed industries all over the country, Strong Industry Academic interface, Disciplined and dedicated team work, Continuous Soft skill training.

### **Girideepam School**

Girideepam had a very humble beginning in 1975 with a dozen of tiny tots in a room attached to Bethany Ashram, Kalathipady, and Kottayam. The ardent fervor of Bethany Fathers synchronized with social commitment helped the School to grow by leaps and bounds doing good to society. In 1987 presented the first batch of SSLC and since then an uninterrupted history of total pass with top State Ranks and grades continues. Hundreds of young citizens passed out of this Temple of Learning with a lamp in their hands and a song on their lips. In 2002 this School was upgraded to a Higher Secondary School.

The credibility and social commitment of this Institution called for another School with CBSE syllabus. Girideepam Bethany Central School established in 1997 an offshoot of Girideepam High School. This School in the same campus has grown into a full-fledged Senior Secondary School and has presented the first batch of AISSE (X) in 2001 and AISSCE (XII) in 2003. The commendable results in Board Examinations put this School in the list of top ranking CBSE Schools in the country.

## **BETHEL ASHRAM**

### Location

Bethel ashram is located in Tiruvalla. Tiruvalla is a town and a Taluk headquarters located in Pathanamthitta in the state of Kerala in south India.

### Historical Background

In 1918, Metropolitan Mar Ivanios and Alexios Mar Theodosius started the Ranny-Perunad Ashram. The objective was to live according to the monastic vows through the Holy Qurbana, prayer, study and mission activities. A hospital in Perunad, a Bethany High School in Kunnamkulam and an old age home in Kuzhimattom, Kottayam are functioning under the supervision of the Bethany Ashram. There are branches of the Bethany Ashram in Kunnamkulam (1920), Kuzhimattom (1969) and Elapara (1993). There are 17 members in Bethany Ashrams. Fr. P.T. Geevarghese (later Mar Ivanios) (1918- 1930), Alexios Mar Thevodosios (1930-1965), Abo Yuhanon (1980-1986), Fr. Kuriakose (1989-1989), Fr. Paulose (1989-1992), Fr. Solomon (1993-1996) were the chief office bearers. Since 1996 Fr. Stephen O.I.C is the Superior.

In 1992, Miss. Neve, a C. M. S. Missionary, felt the need to serve the women of the diocese in a wider sphere than in the Training School (B. I. Pallom), where she was working. Miss. Rachel Joseph, a high school teacher, joined her in the new venture. They rented a house in Alappuzha and undertook various activities among the women. The name 'Bethel' was adopted, and their work soon attracted women students from all parts of the Diocese.

Bethel moved to permanent quarters at Warikkad, Tiruvalla, in 1996. In the same year, the community school for backward class children was started. There were homes for motherless babies, a crèche, a dispensary, industrial section and all the other activities of the community. When the C. M. S. headquarters secretaries visited Bethel in 1934, they were impressed by its distinctive Indian character and the emphasis placed by the Ashram upon, 'meditation and devotion.' Branches of Bethel have subsequently been opened at Trichur, Kallada, Parkal and Melukavu. 'Bethel Day' has throughout been a very popular annual feature drawing a large crowd year by year.

In 1922, the Rev. T. K. Benjamin, was appointed Archdeacon of Kottayam and Bishop's Commissary. It was said at that time, 'This was essentially a step in the right direction and cannot fail to be of great benefit.'

### Contributions of Bethel Ashram to Society

When the church Mission Society arrived in Kerala, for mission work, the condition of the people was very pathetic. The cast system was very strong. As the people of the lower caste were slaves, they lacked the knowledge of God as well as the ability to distinguish between good and evil. When crises like illness tribulation, et cetera, arise, they cry out to their forefathers and worship devils. Since they did not own any land or property, they had to survive on piece works and handouts for their food and shelter and consequently, lived a hand to mouth life.

As a result of the great revival, and the renaissance occurred in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, many young people started towards the different corners of the world for missionary and educational work. They came to Kerala also and suffered a lot to uplift the poor and the downtrodden. Their predecessors carried the same zeal in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By the beginning of the twentieth century, there was much progress in the life of the people of Kerala. The missionaries traveled across the country with the gospel truth. They started schools, built churches, and started worship in the local languages, focusing on the poor and the down trodden.

The then Bishop Rt. Rev. Ch. Gill and his wife tried to persuade educated young women for the ministry in uplifting the women and girls. As a result Edith Neve and Rachel Joseph, the then teachers of Baker memorial school Kottayam, being guided by the Holy spirit surrendered their lives to this cause. They stepped out to lead a simple and sacrificial life to identify themselves with the poor. In 1922, they named the house BETHEL – which has the meanings “House of God”, “Gate of Heaven” and “house of prayer”. They adopted the Motto ‘as seeing Him who is invisible.’

### **Parkal Mission**

Parkal mission was started in response to the challenge given by the first Indian Bishop of Dornakal Diocese Rt. Rev. V.S. Azaria when the missionaries felt the need of women missionaries in this area. Then it was decided in the Bethel Ashram to bring in sisters for women's work. Thus the sisters started their mission

work in the Parkal area, in 1947 with night schools, medical help, visiting the villages etc. The first sisters were sister Mary Thomas and Sr. Annie Thomas. Their only conveyance was Bullock cart. Cholera leprosy and T.B were very common and were not aware of the preventive measures or treatments.

While they were having their visits, they came across many abundant babies of only days of age under the shade of trees and on roads. They accepted them just depending on the Bible verse Mathew25:40. They named the branch as “Home Of Love.”

### **1. Boys Home.**

First the boys and girls were brought up together. Then in 1982, When Sr. Mary Thomas got retired, instead of going back to Kerala, realizing the need for the separation of Boys and girls, she moved to Gandhinagar with the boys. She began the new home in a hut.

### **2. Bethel Gospel Assembly**

The first Church for the Bethel Gospel Assembly was started in the year 1987 at Kumbanad. Another church was established in Bombay in the year 1989 and registered as an Organization in the 1990. At present they have over 150 Churches in India in various states. Its head office is in Pathanapuram, Kerala, India. Bethel Gospel Assembly has an effective administration under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Joy P. Oommen. Every year in the last week of January will have General Convention at Pathanapuram, Kerala, India. God has given a beautiful convention center. They have hundreds of dedicated, full time ministers, working with Bethel Ashram. Under this organization they have many charitable works and various other ministries.

### **3. Bethel Orphanage**

Bethel Ashram has an orphanage in Orissa at Nabarangpure for the poor children. They bought two acres of land to build the Bethel Children’s home and Bethel Christian School.

### **4. Bethel Refuge Home**

Bethel Refuge Home is for people who are rejected from their respective homes, for accepting Jesus Christ as their personal savior. The ashram bought the land to build a house especially for such people.



## 5. Bethel Marriage Funds

Bethel ashram, besides the many other activities she is also involved in facilitating and helping poor girls to get married.

## 6. Bethel Building Funds

Besides, Bethel helps the less advantaged ones of the community who cannot afford to erect their own houses to build their own houses. There are many believers without a shelter.

## 7. Women in Action Ministries

Bethel ashram also operates auxiliary ministries which target specific needs in the communities. One such auxiliary group and ministry is the “Women in Action Ministries”.

Women in Action Ministries was started by Mrs. Grace K. Oommen under Burden for India Ministries. The vision and main objective of this Ministry is to support poor students in their education and other needs.

### Burden for India Ministries

Another active auxiliary ministry group run by Bethel ashram is the Burden for India Ministries (BIM). This is a group which could best be described as a candle light for India in which thousands of peoples are in the spiritual darkness. It carries the gospel of Jesus Christ to the unreached. The group was first conceived and begun by Dr. Joy P. Oommen, while he was in Bible College. God gave him a Burden for the Gospel work in India. That burden was burning in his heart for many years. It was this burden on his mind that led to the founding of this ministry and consequently its name in the year 1982.

Joy Oommen was born in the year 1942. His father was an Evangelist. He was called into the ministry in 1964, while he was working with the India Steamship Company, Bombay, India. Since 1970 he is doing various Gospel Ministries. He was a visionary seasoned Christian whose passion was to reach out to the unreached multitudes of India.

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- <sup>1</sup> C.G. Varghese, *St. Thomas in India*, (Kerala: Readers Publication 2000, pg. 28).
- <sup>2</sup> “Saint Thomas Christians”, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint\\_Thomas\\_Christians](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Thomas_Christians) (accessed on January 02, 2013).
- <sup>3</sup> Tito Thomas, “A Study on Christavashram, Manganam With Special Reference to Its Holistic Ministry,” a thesis submitted to Union Biblical Seminary, Pune, 1998, p.2
- <sup>4</sup> A. Simon George, *Acharya K.K Chandy, Life and Achievements* (Ernakulam: n/a, 2001, p.47).
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid*,46-49
- <sup>6</sup> Christavashram Report for 1987 (Manganam, Kerala: Ashram Press, 1987), p.1.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Constitution of The Society of St. Thomas* (Manganam, Kerala: Ashram Press,(undated)),p.17.
- <sup>9</sup> Old Testament. Psalm, 111:10.
- <sup>10</sup> N.R. Swaroop, Sacena. ‘Education in Emerging Indian Society,’ (Meerut R. Lall Book Dept: 2006) P 97.
- <sup>11</sup> Chandy K.K Sadhu Mathaicheu (Kerala, Kaipuraidum, Punnaveli, 1996), p.29.
- <sup>12</sup> The New Testament: John 1:1-14
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>14</sup> *The Constitution of The Society of St. Thomas* (Manganam, Kerala: Ashram Press,(undated))
- <sup>15</sup> K.M. George, Sadhu Mathaichu, ‘A Multifaceted Christian Yogi,’ (Kerala KM Gense Publications 1996) p. 48
- <sup>16</sup> New Testament, Matthew 19:27; John 1: 29-47; 6:66
- <sup>17</sup> *The Constitution of The Society of St. Thomas* (Manganam, Kerala). Ashram Press: (undated) Page 4.
- <sup>18</sup> The Constitution of the Society of St. Thomas (Manganam, Kerala: Ashram Press, undated),
- <sup>19</sup> Samuel T. Varghese, *Smile India*, Annual Report 2002-2003, p.2.

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- <sup>20</sup> P.T. Thomas, *Talk at Cottage Prayer at Christavashram*, Reported by Kutti Sir (Manganam, Kerala: Ashram Press, May 1994).
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, talk on 'Kingdom of God' (Ernakulam, Kerala: Y.M.C.A., 1969).
- <sup>22</sup> The Constitution of the Society of St. Thomas (Manganam, Kerala: Ashram Press, undated), p.4.
- <sup>23</sup> Sadhu Matheichan, "Talk at Student Christian Movement Retreat at Christavashram" as reported by K. Jacob Kurian (Manganam, Kerala, 1960).
- <sup>24</sup> Tito K. Thomas, "..."
- <sup>25</sup> T.G Joseph, Secretary, Christavashram, in an Interview with K. Thomas, (Manganam Kerala, 17<sup>th</sup> April 1997)
- <sup>26</sup>
- <sup>27</sup> Simon George. Acharya, K.K. Chandy. *Life and Achievements*, (Manganam, Kerala). Ashram Press: 2001 Page 7.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Mahatma Gandhi quoted in a tract, "Kurisumala Ashram, Monastery of our Lady of Kurisumala (Cistercian Abbey)".
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Chandy K.K., 'Sadhu Mathaicheu. (Kerala, Kaipuraidum, Punnaveli,' 1996) p. 29
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.30
- <sup>33</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, opt cit.
- <sup>34</sup> Chandy K.K., 'Life and Achievements,' (Kurisumala Ashram, 2001) p.10
- <sup>35</sup> Chandy K.K., 'Life and Achievements,' (Kurisumala Ashram, 2001),p.11.
- <sup>36</sup> <http://www.drcm.org/history>, accessed January 14, 2013.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> Old Testament. Isaiah 40: 28-31
- <sup>39</sup> Simon George
- <sup>40</sup> Information in this section was sourced from Mr. A.D Matthew, one of the interviews at the ashram who gave the *Divine Retreat Center* brochure to this researcher on February 01, 2013, in which details about the ashram are given.

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However, the brochure does not have bibliographical details for conventional reference.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Idaho, MI: Review and Herald), p.307

<sup>45</sup> See fn.49

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

**CHAPTER 5**

**CRITICAL AND  
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF  
THE CHRISTIAN ASHRAMS IN  
TAMIL NADU AND KERALA**

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**CRITICAL AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE**  
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**Introduction**

India is a land that has given birth to major world religions, such as Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, Parsees as well as several tribal communities lived together for centuries in India and each religion played their own cultural and regional identity. But when Christianity was introduced to India by the European Missionaries they gave it a western orientation and eliminated Indian elements from it. Consequently, they introduced their systems and brought with it a predominantly rigid and negative attitude to other religions.

This posed a great threat to the cultural identity of the people in India which subsequently, in reaction to this threat, inspired the founding of Christian Ashrams in the two states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The rationale behind this development was the desire to have a suitable indigenous forum for reflection on the cultural identity for presenting the gospel in India.

Though in general terms Christian ashrams in India may on the surface have a semblance of being uniform in their functions and constitutions, there are several significant areas in which each of them at the same time differs from the others. A comparative analysis of the Christian ashrams of Tamil Nadu and Kerala suggests this conclusion. The purpose of this chapter is to present a critical and comparative analysis of the Christian Ashrams under study in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

The following points are analyzed by the researcher with the objective of critically and comparative analyze the role of these ashrams play in the said research areas of Tamil Nadu and Kerala States of South India. They are as follows:

- i. Christian Virtues Practiced in Ashrams
- ii. The Analysis of Values of Ancient and Current Religious Practices in Ashrams,
- iii. The contribution of Christian Ashrams in light of their objectives, Education, , Religious and Spiritual Needs, Social and Health Services, and the Problems Faced by the Ashrams.

## **CHRISTIAN VIRTUES PRACTICED IN ASHRAMS**

### **ASHRAMS IN TAMIL NADU**

In Tamil Nadu, there are a number of Christian Ashrams out of which the researcher identified for the current study which are five important and active Christian ashrams. These are:

1. Christukula Ashram
2. Saccidananda Ashram
3. Christu-Shishya Ashram
4. Anbu Vazhvu Ashram
5. Christian Missionary Society

Here henceforth, the researcher discussed the Christian virtues that are practiced in these Ashrams in one Ashram after another format.

#### **Christukula Ashram**

In Christukula Ashram which is located in Tirupattur, the researcher identified a number of certain Christian virtues that are practiced as pointed out in page 61 of this study. These comprise the following: conducting bible studies in the established vocational bible schools along with a strong emphasis on prayers and retreats.<sup>1</sup>In ancient time where the Gurukul system was followed under the Guru and only Brahmacharya were permitted in the Gurukul system. This was basically one of the important ideals in ancient tradition.<sup>2</sup>These practices are targeted towards the devotees as well as those who come to this ashram in which they follow through formation of a Gurukul

system, a system that is open to all. In this way the young people receive proper training of service to their respective communities, and the cultivation of personal spirituality as Christian virtues is encouraged resulting to a holistic sense of character development.

Since its inception, Christukula ashram has proved to be a dynamic force of contribution towards the general welfare of the community. Additional and yet significant aspect of Christian virtues practiced in this ashram as indicated on page 59 to 60 of this study, is the training and counseling in Christian living through studying, fellowship and service for humanity. Other practices observed in this Ashram include self-denial, service of good of others, selfless service to others. All these practices were also seen practiced in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ of who is the best example Christian virtues in which he had practiced (Luke 19:10).<sup>3</sup>

#### **Saccidananda Ashram**

Saccidananda Ashram which is also known by the name of Shantivanam is located in the village of Tannirpalli in Tiruchirappally, a district in Tamil Nadu. In this Ashram some of the Christian virtues pinpointed by the researcher in this study as indicated on page 65 comprise of worship for spiritual edification, integration of Hindu beliefs and practices and those of Christian beliefs and practices of which are in tandem with the objectives of the Ashram. Counseling that is observed in this Ashram plays a role in giving clear guidance to the people so that they can make proper and mature decision in areas that are important in life. The provision of homes and the shelter for the homeless people in and around the community is extended or rather availed with love and cheer by this Ashram.

Since its establishment, Saccidananda Ashram, in similar manner as many other Christian ashrams in the area, has made significant contributions to society and the people who meet its activities. This is especially true in the social, religious and educational sectors.

#### **Christu-Shishya Ashram**



Bishop Herbert Pakenham Walsh founded Christu-Shishya Ashram located in Coimbatore. The key Christian virtues practiced by this Ashram as ascertained by the researcher involve fighting ignorance, pride, hatred, and prejudice that had plagued the community.<sup>4</sup> Jesus Christ talked not to have prejudice and hatred with one another but to humble and simplicity will lead to great experience of joy in life. Bishop Herbert P Walsh established the Bala Bhawan to help the vulnerable and unfortunate people with emphasis given to children of the community by providing them with various needs. Care and concern was given to the people with various physical and mental ailments through the Bishop Walsh Memorial Hospital. A key Christian virtue that the researcher would like to highlight in Christ-Shishya Ashram is free treatment that was given to the deserving cases in the community. In doing so, this would uplift the plight of the vulnerable, unfortunate and poor people of the community.

#### **Anbu Vazhvu Ashram**

Anbu Vazhvu Ashram is located in Palani and the Christian virtues practiced in this Ashram are a reflection of the dynamic contribution to spirituality of the community that was brought under the leadership of Guru (Teacher) who introduces the three elements to live a spiritual life in his teachings, which are prayer, meditation and self-realization. The study of the Bible and the elements of spiritual life is very essential to Anbu Vazhvu Ashram which leads to great ideal of self-discipline.<sup>5</sup> The ideal Guru of this Ashram is Jesus Christ who has all the qualities to be admired as spiritual teacher, who practiced non-violence and never injured anyone and was totally committed to the well-being of others.<sup>6</sup>

These Christian virtues help in shaping and modulating the culture of the surrounding communities. This endeavour is well complimented by the services of the library, which has a wealth of spiritual oriented books. Further still, this ashram is known as the center of training in order to attain spiritual discipline. The study of the bible is considered as one of the vital and essential Christian virtue

observed in this Ashram; conversely, this practice is highly upheld by all the devotees of the Ashram.

### **Church Missionary Society**

Christianity in the southern part of India especially Tirunelveli was established due to the efforts made by Sir Rhenius with the help of the Church Missionary Society. Since its establishment as an ashram, it has played a major role in building up the economic, social and educational factors in the society.

Christian virtues are practiced and followed in this Ashram. Caring for the aged, mentally disturbed, visually disabled, handicapped women, and other unfortunate people of the community. From time to time, this Ashram organizes camps and retreats for children to help them understand the Christian virtues and train them to be good citizens. Medical mission initiated by this ashram has been found most rewarding among the people who served the community. Other Christian virtues that can be denoted as practiced in this Ashram include self-denial, sacrifice to others, love and respect to humanity, and selfless service to the community.

### **ASHRAMS IN KERALA**

In Kerala, there are a number of Christian Ashrams out of which the researcher identified for the current study. It will be good to note that these Ashrams are five important and active Christian ashrams. These are:

1. Christavashram
2. Kurisumala Ashram
3. Divine Retreat Center(Potta Ashram)
4. Bethany Ashram
5. Bethel Ashram

Here henceforth, the researcher discussed the Christian virtues that are practiced these Ashrams in one Ashram after another format.

### **Christavashram**

Christavashram is one of the Christian Ashrams found in Manganam in Kerala, located in the city of Kottayam. Sash K.I. Matthau, Rev. J.P. Moothedath and K.K.Chandy founded Christavashram in 1940. The Christian virtues practiced in this ashram is to give home for waifs and strays by providing them with lodging, board and clothing and seeks to make them physically, mentally and morally fit to be useful members of society.<sup>7</sup> Even after completing 78 years meaningful existence the Christavashram is still trying to maintain the course for which it was found.<sup>8</sup>

The ashram also gives them training which would relate worship, work and art together in their day to day life, and by giving them vocational training which would equip them to earn their living by honest labour. As the Ashram is a Christian body, the training given to the children will naturally be of a Christian character. The most important Christian virtues practiced in this Ashram are the hospitality and prayer.

### **Kurisumala Ashram**

Kurisumala Ashram located near Vagamonis a Cistercian Monastery in Syro-Malankara Catholic Church. It was founded and established on March 21, 1958 by John Mahieu a Cistercian monk from the Scourmont Abbey, in Belgium.

The Christian virtues that are practiced in this Ashram comprise of providing selfless service to others, the solemn practice meditation and devotion in spiritual matters. The philosophy of work is cultivated as a Christian virtue in this Ashram and this is emphasized through field activities. However, key to Christian virtues in this Ashram is seeking God with an undivided heart.<sup>9</sup> The most important virtues practiced in this Ashram is silence. Through silence, one can experience the sense of joy. Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi said silent is the strength of all seekers of truth.<sup>10</sup>

### **Divine Retreat Center (Potta Ashram)**

The Divine Retreat Center or Potta Ashram is a 'Catholic' Charismatic Renewal Ashram located in Muringoor on the banks of the Chalakudy River, Kerala in India. Fr. George Panackal and Fr. Romulus Nedumchalil founded Potta Ashram in 1977.

The Christian virtues identified by the researcher as indicated on page 114 to 118 of this current study that are relevant to DRC as an Ashram include: care for the abandoned which is offered through the DRC Homes, care for the mentally ill that are attended to through the Santhipuram Care Centre, care and home provided towards the HIV/AIDS sick people of the community, care for spiritual needs of youth especially through the role played by the Bible College established by DRC in 1998 that emphasis on free education that has a rich Christian element weaved to the curriculum. These are just among other Christian virtues that are observed in the DRC Ashram.

### **Bethany Ashram**

Bethany Ashram is located in Perunad Ranni, and was founded by P.T. Geevarghese Panickaruveettiil. The identified Christian virtue in the Bethany Ashram emphasized on imitating Jesus through apostolic activities. To achieve these goals, the practices involved obedience, chastity, which is through a community-centered life.<sup>11</sup>

Other Christian virtues of the Bethany Ashram that the researcher identified of this current study comprised of activities such as preaching the gospel, inter-religious interaction, missionary activities that were focused to evangelical work in India.

### **Bethel Ashram**

Bethel Ashram is located in Tiruvalla is an offshoot of Bethany Ashram mostly dedicated to women of the community. The Christian virtues identified by the researcher as revealed of this study, which include the providing of care, refuge and a home for boys, through the Bethany orphanage homes. Though economic in nature, the provision of marriage fund and building funds was identified to have been Christian and morally motivated. The Bethel

Ashram has also initiated Christian centered Ministries that are targeted at women specific needs, which is achieved through the Women in Action Ministries. Finally yet importantly, the burden taken up by the Ashram to uplift the community from spiritual darkness is of a noble course and this is carried forward by Burden for India Ministries.

It is of significance to point out that the role played by these Christian Ashrams in Tamil Nadu and Kerala is of importance in regards to the impact they create in the communities that there are located. One striking point that stands out is the influence of the Caste System that was prevalent before the establishment of these Christian Ashrams. With strong influence of Caste system, the society was very rigid in regards to how community members related with one another.

The establishment of these selected Christian Ashrams in both research areas, the researcher observes that the strong influence that the Caste System had on the society has been diluted to a great degree such that vices such as hatred, pride, prejudice have disappeared due to the Christian influence through their virtues of simple community centered lifestyle and as well as the education system that comes along with these Christian Ashrams.

The researcher would also like to underscore the scope of the Bethany Ashram in Kerala. It is noted that this Ashram has grown in size and geography to have the maximum impact to the South Indian communities. This is evident in the number and strength of these subsidiary institutions that have sprouted. These include Parkal Mission, Bethel Gospel Assembly, and community schools for backward class children, homes for motherless babies among many others.

**CHRISTIAN ASHRAMS IN TAMIL NADU AND KERALA**  
**ANALYSIS OF VALUES, ANCIENT AND CURRENT**  
**PRACTICES**

In this section, the researcher seeks to present the comparative analysis of the values and religious practices observed in the ancient ashrams as opposed to those that are practiced in the current settings of the Ashrams that were selected for the current study in the areas of Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

**Table Showing the Comparative Analysis of Ancient and Current Practices in Ashrams in Tamil Nadu**

Ashrams (Tamil Nadu)	Religious Practices	
	Ancient Practice	Current Practice
1. Christukula	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formation of Gurukul for training of service and cultivation of personal spirituality.</li> <li>Gandhism with emphasis on non-violence, passive restore, non-cooperative etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Love for the poor by living a simple life.</li> <li>Sharing of God given privileges to promote spiritual, mental and material upliftment.</li> <li>Reveal Christ by life and Practice guided by the fruit of the Holy Spirit such as love, joy and peace.</li> </ul>
2. Saccidananda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ancient religious practices like obedience, chastity and community life.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Worship activities to integrate Hindu and Christian beliefs and practices such as prayer, meditation, and Sadhanas (self-realization).</li> <li>Practice of religious practices of obedience, chastity, community life.</li> <li>More emphasis on yoga</li> </ul>
3. Christu-Shishya		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Congregate twice a year and observed rules of confession and communion</li> </ul>
4. Anbu Vazhvu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Indigenization</li> <li>Discarded all Western ways of life i.e. dress, food, prayers, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guidance in spirituality to community through indigenization.</li> </ul>
5. Church ary Society		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocational Bible School Camps</li> <li>Sangam for training children.</li> </ul>

*Source: Researcher's analysis.*

**Table Showing the Comparative Analysis of Ancient and Current Practices in Ashrams in Kerala**

Ashrams (Kerala)	Religious Practices	
	Ancient Practice	Current Practice
<b>1. Christavashram</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gandhism with emphasis on non-violence, passive restore, non-cooperative etc.</li> <li>• Hospitality was warm with care.</li> <li>• Emphasis on celibacy</li> <li>• Practiced the Constitutional visions, values and practices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gurukul system.</li> <li>• Move away from Celibacy</li> <li>• Shift emphasis from original vision, values and practices.</li> <li>• Evangelism i.e. Content of Gospel shift from basic standard to that driven by personal relationship with God.</li> <li>• Passion for Gandhism lessened.</li> <li>• No warm hospitality extended.</li> <li>• Ecumenism which claims to achieve unity not uniformity.</li> </ul>
<b>2. Kurisumala</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Syrian Liturgy.</li> <li>• Indian Monastic lifestyle.</li> <li>• Benedictine-Cistercian Spirituality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meditation, devotion, service in life.</li> <li>• Monastic lifestyle.</li> </ul>
<b>3. Divine Retreat (Potta Ashram)</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spiritual devotions</li> <li>• Free Spiritual Counseling.</li> </ul>
<b>4. Bethany</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indian sanyasi traditions.</li> <li>• Hospitality.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practice of chastity, obedience and community life.</li> <li>• Prayer and meditation</li> <li>• Love for manual labor</li> <li>• Mutual love.</li> <li>• Cooperation and spirit of service within the community.</li> <li>• Hospitality.</li> </ul>
<b>5. Bethel Ashram</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very strong influence from the Caste system.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less influence from the Caste System due to education.</li> <li>• Strong emphasis on women ministries.</li> <li>• Provision of marriage and building funds.</li> <li>• Emphasis on homes for refugees, orphans.</li> </ul>

*Source: Researcher's analysis*

## CRITICAL AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

In this section the discussion is about the contribution of the selected Ashrams under study using the following parameters as means of criticizing and comparing their contribution. These parameters that the researcher employs include: objectives, education, religious and spiritual needs, social services, health, other contributions, problems and challenges. It is of importance to note that all the discussion in this section are based on the findings that are presented in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Chapters of this current study i.e. Christian Ashrams of Tamil Nadu: Their Socio-Religious and Cultural Contributions and Christian Ashrams of Kerala: Their Socio-Religious and Cultural Contributions.

### ASHRAMS IN TAMIL NADU

#### Objectives

To begin with, the objectives of *Christukula Ashram* embody the vision and goals of the Ashram. The Ashram has listed down eight objectives that guide in carrying out its affairs. In brief, the objectives point to establishing an Ashram that unites all by the love of Christ. A life of simplicity is emphasized that will play a role in revealing Christ in their life and in the fellowship of Christ disciples. Further on, the observance and practice of Indian spiritual hermitage is promoted, as well as cultivating love in through prayers and spiritual friendships.

The objective of *Saccidananda Ashram* basically focuses on the way of contemplated life of the tradition of Christian monasteries with relation to Hindu Sanyasis in to integrate Benedictine mysticism with the model of Ashram.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, *Christu-Shishya Ashram* dedicates all its energy and resources towards fighting of ignorance, pride, hatred and prejudiced as pointed out clearly in its objectives. If you consider the objectives of *Anbu Vazhvu Ashram*, it is revealed that more emphasis is given to the promotion of awareness



in the importance of ecology and environment. The role of leadership and establishment of religious harmony through prayer and meditation and the empowerment of the downtrodden is of significance. Lastly, the objectives of *Church Missionary Society* are directed to addressing the economic, educational and the social needs of the poor, aged, mentally ill, visually disabled and the retarder people of the community.

### **Education**

The contributions by Ashrams in light to education are such that *Christukula Ashram* runs day and night school which provides social educational, health programmes and training and counseling to youth. Through education they teach sanitation and the hygiene which is well complimented by the hospital that it runs. This Ashram also runs publication for printing education materials that will benefit the society. The researcher identified that *Christu-Shishya Ashram* provides cheap education to the society through the established nursery school and the Bishop Walsh Memorial School, where as *Anbu Vazhvu Ashram* owns a library with books on a different aspects of knowledge in education. Education provides spiritual research oriented studies and hence empowering the communities that are involved.

It is of importance to emphasis the contribution played by *Church Missionary Society*. The researcher highlights that CMS runs a school for the visually handicapped, the Askwith School which was established in 1908. In addition to that, CMS owns and runs a pre-school for 20 toddlers, a residential High School from standards 1 to 9 servicing 179 students. Further, there is an industrial training center for visually handicapped, a workshop for visually handicapped, computer braille, as well as a primary and the middle class high school and the higher secondary schools and colleges.

These institutions of education are: the vacation bible school, primary and middle schools, high school and higher secondary school such as Palamcottah, Megnanapuram, Nazareth, St. John's Girls High School, Victoria Girls High School; colleges such as Palamcottah, Sarah Tucker Training School for Women, Teacher Training Institutes and Polytechnics such as Bishop Sergeant Training Institute, Oolyasthanam Teacher Training Institutes and Sarah Tucker Teacher Training institutes all at Palayamkottai.

However, the researcher noted that *Saccidananda Ashram* does not have any educational institutes of which it would employ in imparting education to the society in the surrounding areas.

### **Religious and Spiritual Needs**

The contributions of ashrams in the light of religious and spiritual contribution by *Christukula Ashram* are such that it conducts bible studies in the vacation bible school, and planned retreat centers. It is noted too that the Ashram runs a Gurukul for training. The researcher observed that in *Saccidananda Ashram* the contribution to society included worship center which was used for edification and fellowship with the objective of integrating the Hindu beliefs and practices with those of Christian beliefs.

In the case of *Anbu Vazhvu Ashram*, the contribution comprised of activities that were conducted in a center for spiritual training. These activities included prayer, meditation and the practice of Sadhana, which was to encourage the devotees to achieve a level of spiritual self-realization. Considering the contributions to the society by *Church Missionary Society*, activities such as Vocational Bible Studies and camps conducted at Courtallam; Sangam were conducted to provide training for the children in praying, reading and understanding Bible.

It is of importance to however note that the *Christu-Shishya Ashram* established a retreat center to hold ecumenical meetings as well as conduct bible study courses. It is further understood that youth and family counseling services were inculcated in the religious and spiritual activities hence the contribution to the members of the community in the surrounding areas.

### **Social Services**

The contributions by Ashrams in light to the social services are such that in *Christukula Ashram* provides trainings for the Apetchikans i.e. volunteers who were to play a role in society by serving others. The other contributions noted are such that the Ashram promoted peace, unity and advocated strongly for human rights and the

general freedom of the people. As regards the *Saccidananda Ashram*, emphasis was given to skill and capacity building through the established tailoring center. This played a contributory role to the society, as it was a means of reducing poverty levels and the crime related offences.

The Ashram's industries and farms created employment opportunities to the community members. Relief and humanitarian assistance was offered to affected communities in times of natural disasters. Other contributions by the Ashram comprised of provision of housing, free counseling and sporting activities that were targeted to the community and society. The researcher would like to point out that the Ashram promoted tolerance in all forms of religious activities and that it served all the people of the community irrespective of color, creed or financial status.

The researcher to be the provision of *Bala Bhavan* notes the *Christu-Shishya Ashram's* contribution to society, which were homes for orphaned children of the society. When considering *Anbu Vazhvu Ashram* not much was identified by the researcher in regards to the social contributions to the society. However, a lot of mention is noted in the category of 'other activities' which somehow do border the realms of social services to the society.

In the case of *Church Missionary Society*, the Ashram has established and runs homes for the aged, visually handicapped women of the society. There is also a children's mission of *BaliarSangam* that was established as early as 1891. Other institutions by CMS include the Good Shepherd Camps and as well as a communication center that housed a printing unit for calendars, greeting cards, birthday and wedding cards among others products.

## **Health**

The contributions by Ashrams in light to the health services are such that in *Christukula Ashram* sanitation and hygiene practices are taught, as well as offering free treatment to the villagers,

and special programs are conducted every Sunday in which camps are conducted in the villages with the objective of creating awareness in regards to health and hygiene. These are conducted through their well-equipped hospital and a mobile clinic that travels around the village offering free treatment.

As regards the *Saccidananda Ashram* health, awareness campaigns are conducted with the objective of fighting HIV AIDS, sensitizing the local population on the dangers of smoking and drug addiction awareness programs that are targeted to the youth. The *Christu-Shishya Ashram's* contribution to society is noted by the researcher to be school health camps to sanitize the community, offering of free treatment to needing and deserving cases present in the community, health services offered to outpatient and in patients at the hospitals. All this healthcare services are supported and offered to the community through the Bishop Walsh Memorial Hospital that was established in 1992. When considering *Anbu Vazhvu Ashram*, it is observed by the researcher that the Ashram does not have health centered activities and as such do not contribute to the society.

Moving on to the contributions of *Church Missionary Society* in light to health, the researcher points out that there is a medical mission at Nazareth, St. Luke's Hospital. Other hospitals run by CMS include hospitals at Maruthakulam, Tuticorin, and Melapalayam all of which provide medical treatment to the poor people of the communities.

### **Other Contributions**

The contributions by Ashrams in light to Other Contribution to society are such that in *Christukula Ashram*, promotion of peace, unity, human rights and freedom are emphasized, and in the case of *Saccidananda Ashram* more prominence is given to human rights and individual freedoms, tolerance in all forms of social and religious activities. As regards *Anbu Vazhvu Ashram*, the researcher identified that there was significant contributions to society through agriculture. This is in the form of the 6-acre land in their possession on which they run a dairy farm and a vegetable garden.

Through these agricultural activities, the Ashram provides employment opportunities to the society.

It is of importance to also note that the Ashram encourages the members of the community to improve their economic status by starting a Small Deposit Scheme, Band Set Income and Small Deposit Funds that have played a role in the lives of the community members by increasing their standards of living. Considering the Other Contributions to the society by *Church Missionary Society*, finished products from the workshop of the visually handicapped young adults are sold off in the Sales Room Counter thus generating money for the Ashram.

It of importance to also note that Offset printer are used by the visually handicapped to print books and scripture material using the Compute Braille press. The researcher also highlights that the *Christu-Shishya Ashram* is noted to not conducting other activities that would contribute to the society in observed above in the other Ashrams of this study.

### **Problems and Challenges**

In this study, the researcher observed that there were two Ashrams in Tamil Nadu that had indicated the problems and challenges they faced and thus were seeking solutions of the same. The Ashrams concerned are *Christukula Ashram* and *Christu-Shishya Ashram*. To begin with, the discussions will present the problems and challenges of Christukula Ashram, which comprised of the challenging conditions for the Bala Sevaks (novices) which they face as they undergo the initiation process.

It is noted that the conditions that are imposed on the Bala Sevaks seem to be too strict and challenging as well for them bare. The other problems and challenges experienced include the scarcity of Brahmacharis due to the low enrollment as well as that the attitude and orientation of the Ashrams was slowly changing from service centered to leader centered. Another challenge noted by the Ashram is the influence and impact of modernism.

The second ashram that the researcher identified problems and challenges was the *Christu-Shishya Ashram*. As noted by the researcher, the Ashram is in dire need for repairs in the women wing quarters, and repairs for the roof to the Bala Bhawan. The rise in cost of living was also identified as a problem, which further pointed out the lack of funds for infrastructure expansion of the Ashram especially at Bishop Walsh Memorial School. Another featured problem identified by the researcher was the lack of tutors who service the schools.

### **ASHRAMS IN KERALA**

In this section, the comparative discussions will be presented as per the laid parameters following the same format that the researcher employed in analysis of the Ashrams in Tamil Nadu.

#### **Objectives**

To begin with, the researcher identified that the objectives of *Christavashram*, centered on promoting spiritual, moral and mental advancement of the members. The rationale for this was to include a charitable or benevolent purpose in the manner of operations in the Ashram. According to its constitutions, the researcher identified 13 objectives which point to the central theme of “Thy Kingdom Come”.<sup>13</sup>

In achieving this objectives, the people were encouraged to work together so as to promote equality, simple living through the emphasis of dignity of manual labor. Other objectives comprised of providing training programs that will empower people physically, mentally and morally. Special attention was given to the youth by organizing vocation, group retreats which will foster unity and co-existence especially the promotion of non-violence and corporation with the international fellowship of reconciliation.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of *Kurisumala Ashram*, the researcher clearly points out that the objectives of the Ashram are centered on the spiritual and religious activities of the Ashram. A featured activity in the Ashram as observed by the researcher is the silence that pervades

the Ashram. As such, the Ashram is a community of spiritual seekers and therefore, major emphasis is directed towards meditation, devotion and prayer.

Considering *Devine Retreat Center (Potta Ashram)*, it is revealed through the analysis that the objectives of this Ashram are to direct and coordinate popular mission retreats that will point people in to the faith of Jesus Christ. The researcher also points out that the nature of the Ashrams is Charismatic movement that started with preaching but now is centered on social projects that are dedicated to helping the poor.

On the other hand, the central purpose of *Bethany Ashram* is to imitate Jesus Christ by the perfect observance of the evangelical counsel of obedience, chastity with special emphasis on community life. More prominence is to monastic traditions as well as Indian sanyasam of the ancient times that pointed to prayer and actions through meditation, which will encourage the people to follow the life of Jesus Christ.

Lastly, the objectives of *Bethel Ashram* highlight living life according to the monastic vows through the Holy Qurbana, prayer, study as well as mission activities. The researcher points out that there is close similarities *in Bethel Ashram and Bethany Ashram* in that the operations of the Ashram are people centered and as well as community life activities.

### **Education**

The contributions by Ashrams in light to education are such that *Christavashram* offers education empowerment through vocational training in areas such as binding, carpentry, dairy farming, typewriting, agricultural activities all which are directed to uplift the plight of the people. There is also, as noted by the researcher, the contribution of education through the Balagram Vidyalaya School i.e. the nursery and upper primary as well as woodwork institute i.e. Bal Tek Woodwork Institute.

It is of importance to note that the Ashram is a non-formal education center which is patterned after the Gurukulas of India i.e. the

Gurukul Ecumenical Institute and Peace Centre which plays an important role in guiding and direction the young adults of the society in making right decisions as appertains to work with a sense of vocation and call from God. Further, on, the researcher identified that the Gurukul system of education created awareness on non-violent culture, lifestyle, and conflict reconciliation as well as resolutions.

Another highlight of the Ashram is the programs offered such as camps, seminars, and training sessions which are all designed to impart leadership training towards a just and peaceful social order which is founded on the ideals of the Kingdom of God.

In the case of *Kurisumala Ashram*, it is revealed to the researcher that the education contribution of the Ashram is centered on the library that is in the center, which has a collection of spiritual books for the purposes of edifying their knowledge. Moving on in the analysis of education contribution is the *Devine Retreat Center (Potta Ashram)*. The Ashram offers free education schemes for the orphans and street children. This is achieved through the school, which is run by the Ashram. Besides that, there is a Bible College in which spiritual instructions is undertaken for the people of the community.

The *Bethany Ashram's* contribution to society is noted by the researcher to be through the Bethany Navajeevan College, a physiotherapy college that is mainly focused in achieving and endorsing Excellency in all areas of teaching. Another school run by the Ashram is the Girideepam Business School, which offers higher education aimed at developing ethical, entrepreneurial and social responsible managers. The social welfare and charitable works of the community are well reflected in its excellence running of old aged home as old home for the destitute and marginalized section of the society.

As regards to *Bethel Ashram*, it is noted by the researcher that the Ashram does not have any educational objectives and therefore does not run any schools as opposed to other Ashrams considered in this study.

### **Religious and Spiritual Needs**



The contributions by Ashrams in light to the religious and spiritual needs are such that *Christavashram* offers cultural and devotional recreations, which are directed to the fellowship of reconciliation and Christian Youth Movement. It is to be noted that the Ashrams has a Retreat Center whereby several Christian movements, organizations, institutions and different church denominations conduct seminars, camps and conferences for the purpose of spiritual advancement. Conversely, different people come together for dialogue and spiritual edifications which results to a unity in Christ.

On the other hand, in *Kurisumala Ashram* more emphasis is given to prayer, meditation and devotion as well as the study and service of life. The monastic life has a strong influence on the day-to-day activities of the Ashram. It is of importance to note that the Ashram runs a church and that their spiritual life is based on the interpretation of the rule of St. Benedict which has a focus on community prayer, manual labor, prayerful spiritual reading. The monastic way of life emphasized on poverty, chastity, simplicity and obedience. It is interesting to know that the Ashram strives at all time to achieve the ideal of unceasing prayer i.e. prayer for the world, prayer for the unity of the churches and prayer for peace.

As regards to the contribution of the *Devine Retreat Center (Potta Ashram)*, the Ashram offers free spiritual counseling, weekly retreats which are offered in seven different languages directed at catering the spiritual needs of the youth. Small prayer groups, bible studies are offered to all youth from all India and there is a Bible College, which is, has the aim of enlightening people of the word of God and offer training sessions to nurture spiritual leaders. It is interesting to note that the Ashram is credited to be the best in spiritual activities and thus attracting many people from around the world.

**In the case of *Bethany Ashram***, the religious and spiritual contribution is mainly centered on hospitality as espoused to be a religious virtue by the Monastic and Indian sanyasi tradition. Having stated so, the Ashram welcomes people who are in search of peace, spiritual guidance and reconciliation. It is important to note that the

Ashram emphasizes on a meditation and fasting to be perfect individuals in the society.

Lastly, the contribution of *Bethel Ashram* are highlighted through the Bethel Gospel Assembly Church, Woman in Action Ministries that are targeted to address specific needs of the community, and the Burden for India Ministry whereby many people are enlightened about spirituality and thus to bring them out of spiritual darkness.

### **Social Service**

The contributions by Ashrams in light to the social services are such that in *Christavashram* is used by the society for social activities such as camps, retreats. For these social activities, the target groups are individuals, families and cultural groups. The researcher will underscore that the Ashram provides employment opportunities to the community so that families are able to support themselves in light to providing education and other social needs. As regards to *Kurisumala Ashram*, the Ashram supports the community that has settled near the Ashram through milk supply at cheap prices, some of the community members have settled on land donated by the Ashram, counseling services are provided for the community and as well as the publication and distribution of religious classics, bibles and books.

In the case of *Devine Retreat Center (Potta Ashram)*, the researcher observed that the social contributions of the Ashram to the society comprised of the running of 2 homes of the aged i.e. Mercy Home and Maria Home. There is also the St. Mary's Home, which is dedicated to those of society that are abandoned and destitute women. It is also noted by the researcher that the Ashrams helps your mothers to find jobs so that they can be able to be self-supportive and sufficient. Another important contribution by the Ashrams as identified by the researcher is that an average of 700 free meals weekly are provided to the hungry, children and needy cases in the nearby hospitals which plays a vital role in the life of the community.

Other than that, DRC Ashram provides shelter to widows, orphans and the poor in general. It is to be noted that as of February

2013, the researcher identified about 150 women as well as 300 children as beneficiaries of the DRC Ashram. Otherwise, DRC Ashram runs other homes which are important in the society i.e. DRC Home for the Children such as Samaritan Home; the homes for those that are mentally ill in society i.e. Santhipuram C. Center; it is of importance to note that the Ashram has a special program for those that are aged men and women who have been neglected by their families due to illness or old aged. As such, the Ashram established the Divine Mercy Home and Maria Santi Bhawan that are specialized to for the needs of these aged and old. In addition to that, the researcher identified from the Ashram that a Divine De-addiction Centre was established focused in rehabilitation of those that are plagued by drugs in society.

**In the case of *Bethel Ashram***, the social contribution is seen by the researcher to be as that the Ashram has instituted a Boys Home, Bethel orphanage, Bethel Refuge Home, Bethel Gospel Assembly. Other than that, there are also schemes run by the Ashram known as Bethel Marriage Fund, Bethel Building Fund all of which are targeted to the less fortunate people of the community. The researcher would like to however, point out that the ***Bethany Ashram*** is not featured in the social contribution since one is the offshoot of the other and thus can be considered as one.

### **Health**

The contributions by Ashrams in light to the health services are such that in *Christavashram* offers health and medical aid to the community even though the Ashram does not run a full-fledged hospital or health related institutions. In the case of *Kurisumala Ashram*, the members of the Ashram collaborated with the Mother Teresa to work in leprosy colonies and homes of the mentally handicapped as well as supplying medication to the needy cases.

As regards to ***Devine Retreat Center (Potta Ashram)***, the Ashram is dedicated to promote good health among the people since they believe that health is a fundamental need of the human beings.

Therefore, the Ashram provided special service to the mentally challenged and depressed chronic sick cases. The other featured health contribution by the Ashrams is the special home for the HIV/AIDS patients and the De-addiction center that is dedicated to help those that are addicted to drugs and alcohol. It is noted by the researcher that, about 150 weekly visit the center for rehabilitation and out of which 80% of the cases have been reported to be a success.

In the case of *Bethany Ashram*, the Ashram runs a clinic that provides free of cost medical treatment to the community. In cases where the clinic is not able to treat the disease, referrals are recommended and at times, the Ashram caters of the medical expenses to be incurred by the patients.

### **Other Contributions**

The contributions by Ashrams in light to Other Contribution to society are such that in *Christavashram* there are activities that promote the economic status of the people through the auxiliary benefits created by the dairy farm, grinding mill, biogas plant and other various agricultural activities that the Ashram manages. All these activities play a role in providing opportunities of manual labor and employment opportunities. In the case of *Kurisumala Ashram*, the researcher identified the following activities that are done by the Ashrams. These activities include breeding cows for milk; they run a small bakery and a vegetable garden all of which contribute economically to the Ashram as well as the community.

On the other hand, *Devine Retreat Center (Potta Ashram)*, the Ashram offers a self-employment scheme runs in the various departments. The Ashrams employs nearly 400 people in the Divine Printer and Publisher department. In addition to that, the Ashram runs a St. De Paul Tailoring School that empowers an average of 300 girls annually by job opportunities in the same as well as otherwise. The researcher also points out that the children under the DRC jurisdiction are a target of the Ashram in regards to uplifting them from poverty by collaborating with the Government of India in its programs of poverty

alleviation. As regards to *Bethany Ashram and Bethel Ashram*, it was noted by the researcher that these two Ashrams did not contribute to the society otherwise, and therefore are not considered under this section.

### **Conclusion**

Having done the analysis in the selected ashrams under, the researcher-identified differences in practices, values in which the Christian Ashrams upheld in their day-to-day operations. It was noted by the researcher that even though there had been a shift in values and practices from the ancient times as opposed to the current times, all Ashrams had one common emphasis on meditation, prayer life, and devotion. The other interesting note by the researchers is that in all cases, the spirit of charity work is emphasized with an element of love for work and simple life. It is also noted that the Ashrams have inculcated the Indian traditional forms of spiritual life (indigenization) and in all functions of the Ashrams.

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<sup>1</sup>*The Constitution of the Christu Kula Ashram, Tirupattur, Extracts from Memorandum, Articles of Association and Bye-laws, Articles 1-9 only.*

<sup>2</sup>N.R. Swaroop, Sacena. 'Education in Emerging Indian Society,' (Meerut R. Lall Book Dept. 2006) P 97.

<sup>3</sup>New Testament, Luke 19:10.

<sup>4</sup> New Testament, Matthew 5:43, 44; Luke 18:14.

<sup>5</sup>Anbu Vazhvu Ashram Newsletter, Palani, p 2.

<sup>6</sup>Grc Row, *The Guru Jesus Christ and His teachings* (Bombay: St. Paul Press, 1972), P 10.

<sup>7</sup>Christavashram Report for 1987 (Manganam, Kerala: Ashram Press, 1987), p.1.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Acharya. *History of Kurisumala Ashram.* (Vagamon: Kerala, 2008). P 15.

<sup>10</sup>Mahatma Gandhi quoted in a tract, "Kurisumala Ashram, Monastery of our Lady of Kurisumala (Cistercian Abbey)".

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>*Saccidananda Nama, A Commemorative Volume*, opt. cit., p. 5, End note #1.

<sup>13</sup>*The Constitution of The Society of St. Thomas* (Manganam, Kerala: Ashram Press,(undated)),p.17.

<sup>14</sup>K.M. George, Sadhu Mathaichu, 'A Multifaceted Christian Yogi,' (Kerala KM Gense Publications 1996) p. 49

**CHAPTER 6**

**CONCLUSION**

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Ashrams in India are important cultural heritages. They play the critical role of transformation and preservation of the ideals of the Indian society and its cultures. For centuries, they have functioned as pockets of dynamic change to the Indian society. However, only few in society know what takes place at these institutions and their value due to lack of publicity. This is very true of Christian ashrams in this country.

This study was undertaken to bring to the public's attention of the existence of these institutions in India. The method used to achieve this main objective was the descriptive method.

Ten ashrams were sampled out at random from among the Christian ashrams in Tamil Nadu and Kerala states, respectively for the purpose of this study. Between the year 1920 and 2003 many Christian ashrams have been founded and established in these states of Southern India but most of them are still not known to the world beyond their immediate surroundings. Though studies done on Christian Ashrams exist, there seems to be no regional study so far done from a historical perspective focusing on the origins of these institutions.

This paper, therefore, has traced the historical development and contribution to society of these ashrams in the years spanning from 1920 through 2003. The specific objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To give the historical background of the Christian Ashrams in Tamil Nadu and Kerala State of South India.
2. To find out the Christian virtues practiced in Ashrams.
3. To analyze the values of the ancient and the current religious practices in Ashrams.
4. To analyze the contribution of Christian Ashrams to social life.
5. To assess and evaluate the impact of foreign forms of worship in comparison with indigenous forms of worship.



## **Findings**

The following are the findings of this study:

1. An ashram is both an outcome and a source of life just as Religion is not a part of life but life itself. Hence, it is possible in the ashram to adapt oneself wholly to all circumstances because it is as supple as life itself.
2. Christian ashrams did not exist in India until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first Christian Ashram was founded in 1921 in Tirupattur while Ashram Shantivanam near Kulittalai in Tamil Nadu was the second Christian- Ashram to be established in 1950 by the Roman Catholics and it was their first ashram.
3. Christian ashrams developed as a response to a conflict situation between Western cultures and Indian cultures as Christian missionaries met resistance from the Indian people who were not ready to adopt foreign cultures and consequently, Christianity itself. Christian missionaries and churches identified ashram life as a strategy to win acceptance with the Indigenous people, which would offer the former an opportunity to spread their religion in India. Thus, Christian ashrams developed as proselytizing tools to convert non-Christian natives, especially the Hindus of India who were prejudiced against anything that they deemed foreign to their traditions and culture. At the same time, these ashrams were also meant to promote mutual respect and harmonious co-existence of different religious groups in India.
4. Since their arrival on the scene, Christian missionaries have consistently strived to adopt the cultural lifestyles of India and have adapted Christianity to the indigenous ways of life and spirituality. This has helped Christianity to survive among the religions of India.
5. Though Christian ashrams were born as strategic tools to proselytize the Indigenous people, it is indisputable too, that simultaneously they were also established for the upliftment of humanity so that people would enjoy peace, brotherhood and harmony
6. Mahatma Gandhi is one of the few local figures who provided both inspiration and model for some Christian ashrams.
7. Ashrams have proliferated down the centuries and it is impossible to guess as to their precise number at the present. However, there are operating ashrams and non-operating ashrams, ashrams that are neither dead nor alive, but terminally sick

ashrams. There are ashrams that draw thousands of pilgrims every year, often-family groups, and provide them with inspiration and energy to carry on the daily struggle for existence. However, this study has noted that most of these Christian ashrams are hardly known yet beyond their immediate surroundings.

8. Christian ashrams India fall under two categories—Protestant and Catholic. Protestants are those Christian congregations, which are opposed to the authority of the Pope of Rome and the teachings of the Catholic Church in general and came out of her because of these doctrinal disagreements. Each of these categories identifies itself with a distinct ideology that marks it out as different from the other .Catholics are devotional ashrams and Protestants are service ashrams and are very much alike to the Hindu disciples of Bhakti and karma yoga, respectively.
9. The essence of ashram life consists in the word “ashram” itself. Shram means hard work, struggle and conflict. A-Shram means no struggle, no conflict, no hard work; no labouring. Ashram life is a life where there is no effort to achieve something .It is a life of inner freedom, spontaneity and effortless life.

The word Ashram means the house of a religious teacher who lives there with his family and his disciples. Their origin is to be sought in the time of the Aranyakas the forest books, to the Vedic period, when the Rishis withdraw to the forest to meditate and made the discovery of the indwelling presence of God, the Atman the inner self. It was from these meditations that the Upanishads—the discourse of the Rishis, were derived describing their experience of God, that is of Brahman as the ground and source of all reality and the Atman—the ground and source of consciousness.To this day, an Ashram remains essentially a place where a holy man retires to meditate and pray, and where a group of disciples gather around in to share his meditation and his experience of God.

On the other hand, an Ashram is essentially a spontaneous way of life, deriving from a special call of God and as little structured as possible. It is not impossible to combine these two ideals, and many Hindu Ashrams today have both aspects. In other words, an Ashram is a contemplative way of life dedicated to the experience of God in prayer and meditation.

10. The aim and vision of the Christian community for establishment of ashrams was to promote mutual respect and understanding between Europeans and Indians. Further, the idea was to accommodate the Indian way of Christian life and

worship and to form fellowship of Christ's disciples and promote the Indian spiritual heritage, and a sense of mutual responsibility.

11. However, on the surface, Christian Ashrams are in many ways similar to Hindu ashrams; they are in essence different in many ways at the same time. For instance, in a Christian ashram religious life is essentially a community life based on shared prayer and a common role of life. It is essentially institutionalized established by a competent authority.

In a Hindu Ashram on the other hand, the Guru is all-important, as everything centers on his particular experience of God. Nevertheless, in a Christian Ashram Christ is truly the Guru. Christian prayer and meditation centers on the experience of God in Christ while in a Hindu ashram the primary relationship is between the disciple and the Guru. For the Christian, the relation of the members with one another as members of the body of Christ is central. For a Hindu the experience of God in silent meditation is fundamental. Though a Christian ashram also attaches some importance to silent meditation, it does not dominate, as is the case in the Hindu ashram. Common prayer, liturgy and the mass also share the central place. A Christian ashram life always seeks to achieve balance between the demands of solitude, personal prayer, the demands of community life, and public prayer. Thus, in a Christian ashram life as a whole is essentially a communion in the body of Christ, which is the distinctive mark of Christian life.

Another characteristic of Hindu Ashram in which it differs from the typical Christian religious community is the simplicity of its standard of life. Christian religious houses are usually modeled on western lines and follow a western style of life. On the other hand, it will always have an Indian style of life. A Hindu normally begins with a sanyasi who lives in an absolute simplicity having just two clothes to cover him and living in a simple hut. Modern Hindu Ashrams have adopted many elements of western culture but they nearly always retain the basic simplicity of an Indian life style, sitting on the floor or at most with the sandals, and sleeping on a mat.

12. A fundamental simplicity is essential to a genuine Ashram, but adaptations can be made to circumstances when it is necessary.
13. Ashrams are not limited to spiritual exercises only. On the contrary they function as training hubs for life skills in the communities in which they exist.

14. Christian ashrams in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, respectively, have contributed significantly to the educational, social, political, religious and economic development of their respective immediate communities and beyond. Though their roles continue to be something that needs be commended and emulated by others, sadly, the study has also noted that,
15. There is a significant observable departure in the values, goals and strategies of some of these ashrams from their initial values with which they started out which often emphasized more on community outreach and development than isolation. The spirit of self-denial, which was one of the top most venerated virtues in the early times for a Christian ashram, is slowly giving way to pomp and greed. Twenty-first century ashramites indulge in luxurious lives. The scarcity of young people among those comprising the fraternity of the ashrams perhaps bespeaks of the lack of flexibility and a rigidity which is not conscious of the changing world around the ashrams or possibly the failure of these ashrams to transform the communities they desire to influence due to the materialist interests that are guiding the lifestyles of the people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
16. These ideologies of the ashrams elicited mixed responses from the society. It helped Hindu and Christian faith to live in amity and without barriers. Also the community responded positively to the Ashrams as they benefited in education and economically as seen in Christu shishya ashram. Anbuvarzhu ashram as well as Christavashram taught dignity of labour and simple life to the community. The community were involved in different activities such as meditation, monastic practices, spread of love among people (Divine Retreat) and outreach ministries.

On the whole the ideologies are an extension and evolution of the founding aims of the ashrams. The basic foundation of these ashrams is to spread love among people as Christ commanded His followers. Mutual tolerance among religious groups, living harmoniously in society, supporting and encouraging community members during crisis and giving hope for a better future is love in action. Educating them to be released from the evils of ignorance was seen as one of the major focus of the ashrams. Dignity of labour, and respect was taught to the community.

17. To achieve the goals, the ashrams followed different practices. Almost all the ashrams followed 'Dhyanam' or meditation. Worship is another activity followed in all the ashrams. Saccidananda ashram integrated Hindu and Christian practices

- to make the worship more meaningful for non-Christians. Yoga was practised in Christavashram. In Divine Retreat they practices “Love Therapy” to help the individuals cope up with problems of life. The underlying force of all practice is to connect people to a higher level of peace.
18. The ashrams were attractive to the community because of their charitable acts and orientation towards the needs of the people. They became extensions of love, care and help during times of crisis in the community. Health services were given by Christukula, Divine retreat, Bethany.
  19. Education is another area where ashrams have made an impact. Especially the economically disadvantaged children were given much focus as seen in Christukula, Chirstushishya, Church Missionary Society, Christavashram, Divine Retreat, Bethany, Bethel ashrams. Community work was focussed by Anbuvasvu, Christavashram, Kurisumala, Bethel ashram. Bethany also assisted in marriages of deprived youth. Bethel ashram emphasised on Women empowerment while Divine Retreat emphasized Rehabilitation of drug addicts. Divine Retreat, Bethel, Christav ashram and Christukula took care of Orphans. Christavashram provided Vocational training. in Church Missionary Society trained and took care of Disabled children. A home for the aged was provided by Church Missionary Society.
  20. Catholic ashrams focussed on contemplative life based on traditions of Christian monasticism and of Hindu Sanyasa whereas protestant ashrams are more towards service. They are very much alike to the Hindu disciples of Bhakti and Karma yoga.
  21. Ashrams preserve the value systems of the community.
  22. Those Christian ashrams that are people-needs oriented as opposed to those that are self-centered in their activities and focus, are comparatively successful and popular among the masses while the self-centered ones are not.

### **Implications of the study**

Based on the findings outlined above Christian ashrams in India may be interpreted in two ways—positively and negatively. On the negative side, they can be said to be symbols of weakness on the part of Christianity. By compromising their

religious tenets and adopting the practices of other religions for the sake of winning converts and popularity with the world, the Christian religion risks losing its credibility as a religion deserving a following. At the same time by placing proselytisation as its motivation for its social efforts and other charitable activities it reflects not only its immaturity but also insincerity. This in itself is a potential barrier to prospective beneficiaries of its activities, as people would naturally stay away from anything that has elements of endangering their religious beliefs and institutions.

On a positive note, Christian ashrams symbolize the strength of Christianity as a religion, which it demonstrates in its willingness to forego any cultural prejudices to ensure a harmonious co-existence and amity with other religions. In other words, Christian ashrams may be said to be symbols of peace, love and mutual respect and freedom.

The noted departure from initial ideals is a threat to the future of ashrams in India. While correction of the motives for their social and other charity works may be commendable and may be reflective of theological maturity and sincerity in their efforts, abandonment of their emphasis on the spiritual aspects of these ashrams may by and by erode their influence and true value to the community. Christian Ashrams ought to witness above all to this dimension of human existence. The world today is preoccupied with the problem of poverty and illiteracy and malnutrition and the need for service of this kind is overwhelming but there is need to insist on the spiritual dimension of all such work. People do not only need food, clothing, shelter, education, and medicine; they need to know that there is a dimension of being beyond these things in which don't live for these life alone, and that nothing can take place the love of God in a genuine human existence.

The need of the Christian Ashram today is therefore to witness ancient values of the Hindu Ashram, the search for God, for the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, for what in Indian they call Brahavidya and Atmavidya. In this respect, it forms an essential link between the Christians and Hindus and for this, it will need to recover the ancient simplicity of life and dedication to humble work, while being open to all the needs of the people especially in the village where the vast majority of people still live. At the same time, it will need to find the center of this work and prayer in the person of Christ, present in each person, in the community as a whole, in the people of neighborhood both Hindu and Christians of all religions. The Ashram itself while consisting of a core of dedicated men and women, should be open to all

comers, men and women, rich and poor, Hindu and Christians and seekers of God of every kind.

These observations are significant to record because religious institutions such as ashrams and churches or mosques and temples are crucial in the development and progress of any given society. Human beings naturally give respect to their religious leaders and belief systems above everything else in their respective communities. For this reason, religious institutions are the most well placed centers of community life transformation and progress. Therefore when such institutions begin to lose direction and dilute their tenets and begin to disintegrate, it may be a worrisome signal to the entire nation because they may reflect the retrogression of that given community or nation.

### **Remedies**

- Meditation has always stood as a classical and central part of Christian devotion. It is recommended that wherever possible such meditation centres should be established to encourage a mental dwelling upon God which opens human nature to the divine flow.
- It is recommended that the clergy leading all other Christian congregations other than the ashrams should adopt the worship styles of meditation of the ashrams and recommend them to their respective congregations for public prayer as an effective tool in devotion.
- Christian ashrams would do well to publicize their activities and discard their isolation policies
- Youth should be encouraged to join and be admissible at the ashrams
- Christian ashrams should learn to be adaptive to changing times though a balance will need to be observed to avoid assimilation of worldly standards, which would ultimately corrode their spiritual values and threaten their very existence.

### **Suggestions For Further Study**

- A study could be conducted to examine the influence of prayer on daily occupations of people.
- Another study could be done on the effects of government land policies on the development of ashrams in India.
- Further, a study could also be done on the impact of spirituality on crimes in India

### **Conclusion**

Ashrams benefit communities in which they exist. Though silent, they are an integral part of society; they help it by holding its finer threads together, keeping man sane and sound to face the rigors of life. The Christian ashrams in Tamil Nadu and Kerala have contributed much to the welfare of the people in their respective surrounding areas. They deserve support and good publicity.



## APPENDIXES

### APPENDIX A: CRITICAL COMPARISON OF THE CHRISTIAN ASHRAMS BASED ON HYPOTHESES

	Hypothesis – 1		Hypothesis – 2		Hypothesis -3	Hypothesis - 4	Hypothesis–5
Ashrams in Tamil-Nadu	Origin of the ashrams	Historical background of ashrams	Ideologies of the ashrams	Responses of the communities	Practices followed in the ashrams	Ashram’s Attractiveness to the community	Objectives of the ashrams
Christukula Ashram (Tirupattur)	March 7 <sup>th</sup> , 1921	Founded by Dr Savarirayan Jesudason, Dr Earnest Forrester Paton. Indian Christian Association was held in Calcutta in 1920. After the first world war, the eyes of many people had been opened and filled with a new idealism. Their local is Tamil	Peace and reconciliation	Community cooperated with Ashram	Transformation and Meditation Dhyanam	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Religious and charitable Act</li> <li>2. Health Service through well-equipped hospital</li> <li>3. Providing education by admitting poor students and Orphans from every region</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.To form fellowship of Christian Disciples</li> <li>2.Seeks to promote Indian spiritual heritage and their observance and practice.</li> <li>3.To love the poor by living a life of simplicity and provide by working of the spiritual, mental and material uplift.</li> <li>4.To cultivate an intimate spiritual</li> </ol>

							<p>friendship</p> <p>5.To demonstrate the power of love</p> <p>6.To help people to take defined decisions.</p>
<p>SACCIDANADA ASHRAM (Kulittalai) (Tiruchiruppalli)</p>	<p>March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1950</p>	<p>Founded by Julius Monchanin and Henri Le Saux</p> <p>This Ashram is also known as Shantivanam means the forest of peace. The ashram was established to suite to the needs of western youths seeking an introduction to the spirituality of the east</p>	<p>To integrate Benedictine mysticism with the model of Ashram</p>	<p>Christianity and Hinduism religions can live together peacefully and are all welcome without any religious or caste barriers.</p>	<p>Ashram conducts its worship activities and has adopted a worship style, which integrates Hindu beliefs and practices and Christian beliefs and practices, which makes it easier for the Hindus and other non-Christian</p>	<p>1. Aspects of the ashram buildings are the temple cumchapel, which is rich in symbolism in the typical south Indian style.</p> <p>2. Non-Christian scriptures and Sanskrit, Hindi and Tamil bhajans are used during worship</p>	<p>1. To establish a way of contemplative life based on traditions of Christian monasticism and of Hindu Sanyasa</p> <p>2. Place of meeting for all people who are genuinely seeking God.</p>

		-English is mainly used as the language of day.			visitors to feel at home as they worship together.	time.	
CHRISTU-SHISHYA ASHRAM (COIMBATORE)	July 15 <sup>th</sup> , 1936	1. Founded by Bishop Herbert Pakenham Walsh, and his wife Mrs. Clare Hayes Walsh under the inspiration and the guidance of Mr. K.C Chacko 2. Though situated in Tamil-Nadu the main language in routine order used in Malayalam were members from Kerala	1. Confession and communion prayer and intercession 2. to reflect the India spiritual Values and ideals	1. Communities are happy because Ashram provides highest quality English medium school at the lowest cost possible. 2. Response from the communities is good	1. To fight against ignorance, pride, hatred and prejudice 2. Home for socially and economically children.	Established home for children who are socially economically poor.	1. To serve as a retreat centre for the Syrian orthodox church. 2. Make product citizen by helping people's total personality.
ANBUVAZHUVU ASHRAM (PALANI)	December 23 <sup>rd</sup> , 1972	1. Founded and established by father Philippe M.P a French Canadian Roman catholic Priest along with KT Chacko 2. Established for the purpose of serving humanity	To discard western ways as much as possible and adopt indigenous customs in prayer, dress, food and furniture	Ashram teaches to the community the dignity of labor and the importance of simple life.	1. To experience contemplative prayer and growth in the experience of God 2. To accept some of the ideals of Gandhi	Social work, economic contribution helped them to become better citizens of India.	1. To develop a Tamil liturgy suitable to the local culture and traditions 2. To be a center for spiritual quest, and using the various meditation techniques of the east. 3.
CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY	1924	1. Founded by Mr. Rhenius.	1. To address the economic	Communities have much	Sowing of the gospel	Education, home for the aged, visually	1. To the love of Christ by doing

SOCIATY (TIRUNELVELI)		2. Promoting literacy among the villagers and testifying the love of Christ	educational and the social needs of the poor 2. To spread Christian gospels	blessed because of the missionary activities as a result people responded to their work		handicapped, residential school for the visually handicapped, children mission BaliarSangam, established bible schools camps arrangements and medical missions	service to the people 2. Provide general education and vocational training to its inmates.
<b>Ashrams in Kerala</b>							
CHRISTAVASHRAM (MANGANAM, KOTTAYAM)	1940	Founded by K.I Mathai, Rev. J.P Moothedath and K.K Chandy. Land was purchased through the aid of Miss I.A Baker. Initially called as retreat center, eventually it evolved into Ashram	3. -To provide social needs of the region. 4. -To uphold ancient Indian traditions	-People cooperated due to Ashrams activities	1. Simple living and high thinking 2. Practiced meditation and yoga.	1. Ashram is organized and patterned after the Gurukulu system of governance 2. Love and devotion to God 3. Social work and education 4. Orphanage farming, training in printing and binding, organizing conferences and seminars 5. Carpentry unit, dairy farm,	1. Recognized Jesus Christ as its Guru 2. Established for the charitable purpose of promoting spiritual, moral, mental advancement of the members and others. 3. Witnessing the kingdom of God through worship, research, study, work and service.

						awareness about joining ashrams	4. Encouraging promotion of celibate groups 5. To bring social and economic order and assuring equality of opportunity to every individual. 6. Simplicity of living and to the dignity of manual labor.
KURISUMALA ASHRAM (VAGAMON)	March 21 <sup>st</sup> , 1958	1. Founded by John Mahieu from Belgium 2. Kurisu means (Cross) Mala means 3. ( Mountain) 4. Founder was influenced and touched by the activities of Mahatma Gandhi and his ideas	To follow Benedictine Cistercian	Activities like dairy farm, medical care, agriculture, bakery, prayer services and Library facilities	1. Meditation and devotion 2. Spirit of prayer 3. Practice of monastic 4. Charisma 5. Lays great emphasis on hospitality 6. Silent prayer	Community work in that region	1. To live monastic occasion within an Indian frame work 2. Seek god with an un-divided heart
DIVINE RETREAT CENTRE (POTTER ASHRAM) KOCHIN	1977	1. Founded by Father Panackal and Romulus Nedumchalil and Father Matthew NaickomParambi 2. To direct and coordinate popular	To help people	1. Education, social, health, spiritual and economic activities 2. Due to their activities communities	Love therapy	1. Prayer meeting 2. Healing ministry 3. Hope for the abandoned 4. Yoga 5. Self-employment 6. Free education for orphans and	To direct and to coordinate popular mission retreat

		mission retreats		responded.		street children 7. Rehabilitation center for drug addicts.	
BETHANY ASHRAM (PERUNAD, RANNI)	August 15 <sup>th</sup> , 1919	Founded by Arch-Bishop Mar Ivanian -First monastic community in Kerala	To imitate Jesus Christ	Educational and health institutes	1. Prayer and meditation 2. Love for manual labor 3. Mutual love corporation and the spirit of service within the community	Education aid, medical aid, assisting marriages, old age homes, charity hospital and schools	To imitate Jesus by the perfect observance of evangelical counsels of obedience, chastity through community life.
BETHEL ASHRAM (TIRUVALLA)	1996	It was established home for the aged, community school for children, seminars and meetings involvement for the purpose of evangelization.	The ideology is to spread the gospel around the region by involving women in action ministry	Community, cooperated with Ashrams because of various activities which had helped for the benefit of the people	Outreach ministries bethel orphanage refuge home, vocational bible schools. Separation of boys and girls home	Attractiveness, social activities, empowerment of women	Encouraged women for gospel work. To support poor students in their education and other needs.

## APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Designation:

Address:

Year of Service in the Ashram:

Date of joining:

Job description:

Describe the history of the Ashram:

Does the Ashram life influence people?

Does the Ashram life attract people?

Age group of people in the Ashram:

0-18

18-36

37-56

Above 56

Among these, which group is attracted more to Ashram?

Reason \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What are the contributions and impact of the ashram on the surrounding communities?

What are the development and changes in the ashram life?

What are the similarities between Hindu Ashrams and Christian ashram?

**APPENDIX C: ASHRAMS IN TAMIL NADU**

**CHRISTU-KULA ASHRAM,  
TIRUPATTUR**



**Picture 1: Prayer Hall Built in the Style of  
South Indian Stone Temples**



SACCIDANANDA ASHRAM,  
SHANTIVANAM



**Picture 2: The Entry to Saccidanda Ashram, Shantivanam**



**Picture 3: A Christian Worship House patterned after a Hindu Temple**

## APPENDIX D: ASHRAMS IN KERALA

### CHRISTAVASHRAM



The main Entry Gate to Christavashram, Manganam, Kerala



Picture 4: Ashramites Having Lunch at Christavashram

## KURISHUMALA ASHRAM



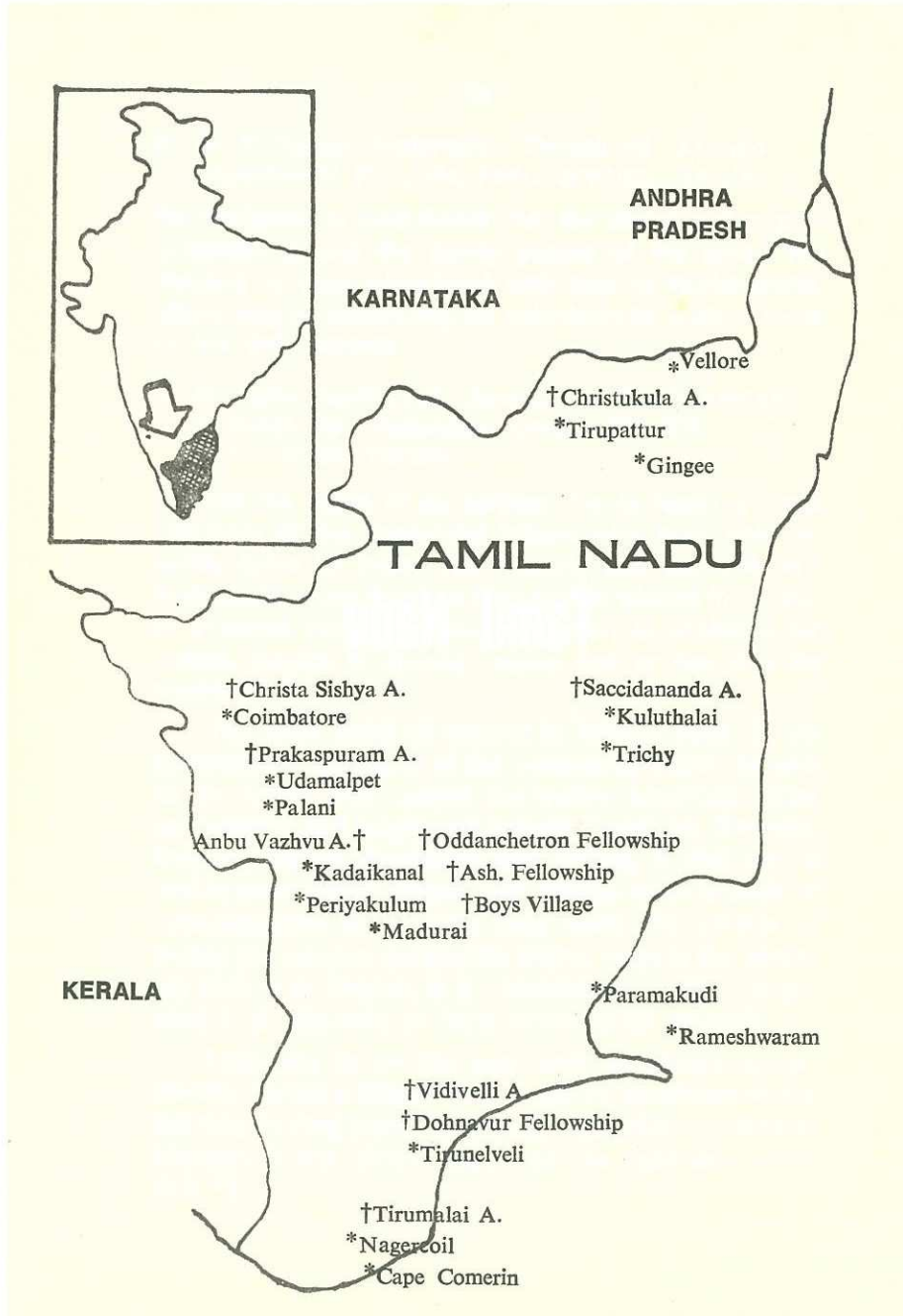
**Picture 5: Ashramites at Worship in Kurisumala**

BETHEL ASHRAM

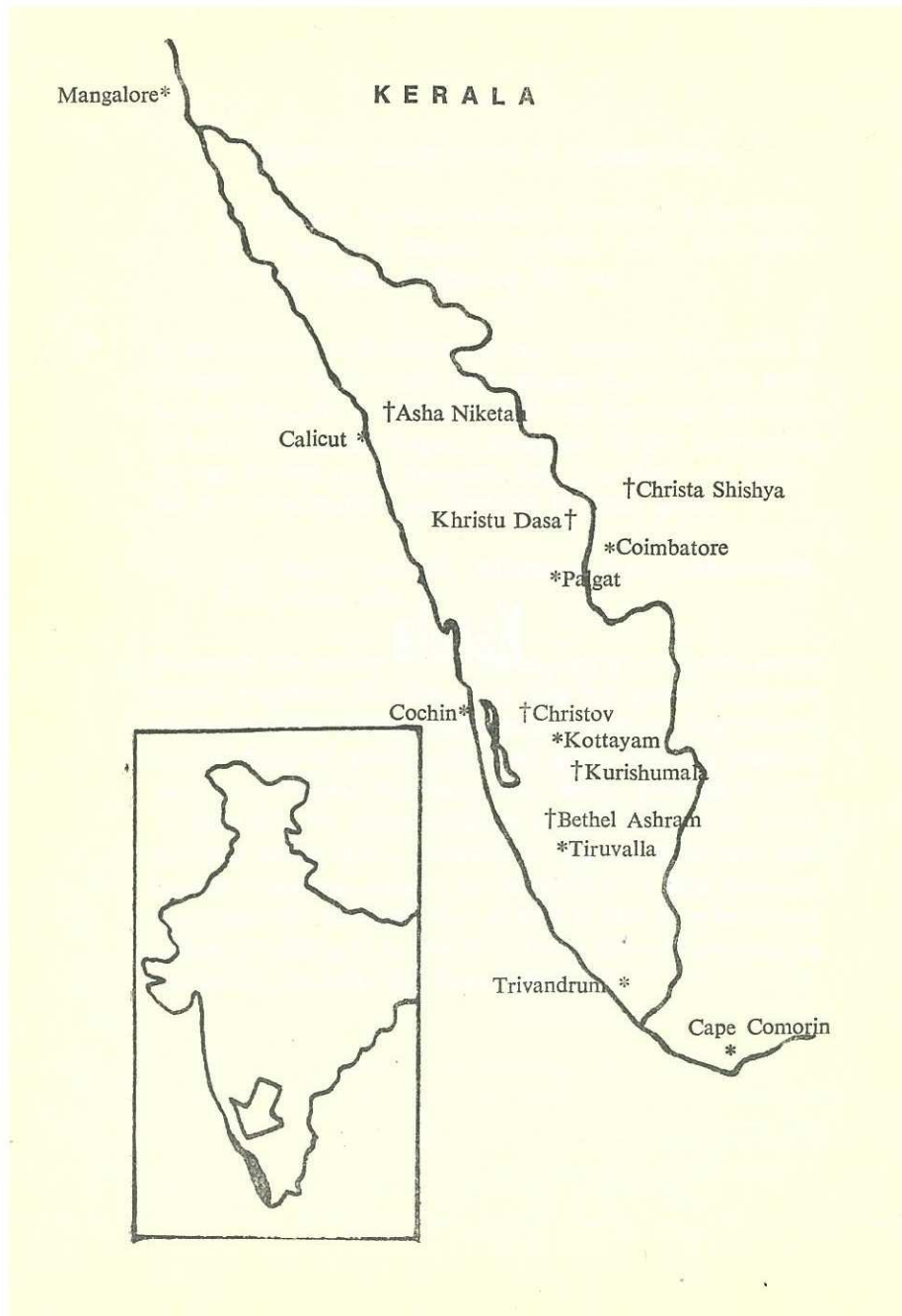


Picture 6: Gateway to Bethel Ashram

**Map 1: Map of Tamil Nadu Showing Christian Ashrams in the Area**



**Map 2: Map of Kerala Showing Christian Ashrams in the Area**



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## **Interviews**

Brother Michael Nathan (28/05/2009)

Priest Ratchanya Nathan (28/05/2009)

Dr. Srinivasalu

Ruth Padmavathi (Nurse)

Mr. Glory Dass (Supervisor)

Santosh Salve

Mr. A.D Matthew (02/02/2013)

Sevak P.KJehny (Kerala Christavashram) 01/02/13

Fr. Solomon (Bethany Ashram, Ranny) 01/02/2013

Mr. Robin

Mr. Charles