

## Hundred Years' of Anglican Tamil Work in Singapore

Singapore. "Malay tradition confirms that the first coloniser of Singapore was a prince from Palembang, the Sumatran capital of Srivijaya. It may have been Rajendracota Deva I (1012 – 44) ruler of Tanjore, who, to commemorate the lion courage of his men, gave the island the Indian name of Singapore (Lion City). He almost certainly attacked the island in A.D. 1025 during his descent on Srivijaya and its colonies. In Javanese inscription and Chinese records down to the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century the commoner name for the island is the Javanese Tumasik from tasek, "Sea". " (E. B. Vol. 20).

Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles landed in Singapore on January 28, 1819 and made a treaty with the local chief. On August 2, 1824 the whole of Singapore Island was ceded to the British for a money payment. In 1851, it was transferred to the direct control of the Governor General of India and in 1967 it became a Crown Colony.

In 1824 a census was taken by the British. The population of the island was then 10,683. Of these 4,500 were Malays, 3,317 were Chinese, 2,681 were Indians and others were about 100. In 1860, the population increased of whom 50% were Chinese. In 1894 the Indian population was 16,055 and in 1957 it was 124,084.

While Singapore was under the direct control of the Governor General of India from 1851 to 1867, many Indians accompanied the Company officers. There were soldiers, merchants and others. Among these were Christians also. The descendants of at least one such family are with us today. When I arrived in Singapore, there was one Mrs. Emily Rajammal who was living in the Government House Domain. She was the daughter of one Mr Appasamy Havildar who came to Singapore in 1853. It was during this period St Andrew's Cathedral was built and consecrated. Services were held in English and the Indian Christians naturally attended these services. But these services were not of great help to them due to their poor knowledge of English.

Therefore to assist these members, Mission work among the Asians was started. The Rev. E. S. Venn M.A., who arrived at Singapore in 1862 was in charge of this Mission work till his death. It was during his period that a lay worker in the person of Mr Peter Tychichus was invited from Madras. Mr Tychichus is described as " a man long engaged at Madras in Missionary work, and he has ever since been working among his countrymen both amongst the Christians, Heathens and Mohamedans." He was working directly under the Rev. E. S. Venn.

After Rev E.S. Venn, the Catechist had sent a report to one Rev. J. A Beckles, Hon. Secretary to St Andrew's Mission for a period covering from January 1868 to June 1870. The report is as follows: - "Now I beg to lay before you the following account of my work. On Monday and Tuesday I distribute Tracts on various places and also visit Christians and read a portion of the scripture and pray with them.

On every Wednesday I hold a meeting in Tanglin in the rooms of servants of the officers, and conclude with prayer, there has been one servant converted on that place latterly. On meeting in the house of Col. Harkness of the 7<sup>th</sup> N.I Regiment near Sepoy Lines, and conclude with prayer. On Saturday I distribute tracts and study some useful books of Christianity. On Sunday 11.00 a.m., I attend the Sunday School in my house. I generally teach adults both male and female with the children. I also spend some time every day to teach two infant scholars in my house. Generally my wife teaches them. 514 tracts were kindly supplied by the Singapore L.B.T.S. During the past years, I distributed 623 books and tracts, some of there were sold for 23 cents for the benefit of the B.T. Society. During the past year:--

8 Infants were baptised.

4 Adults were baptised.

3 Confirmed by the Bishop of Hong Kong

1 Marriage.

6 Funerals.

The whole number of our Tamil Christians including the children in Singapore is 39 and of these 15 are communicants. Several Christians have gone to their own and other countries; during the past year four catechumens were under instruction for baptism.”

The strength of the Tamil congregation was so poor that they were not able to find a sum of \$30/- per month for their Catechist. They had to be subsidised throughout. This led the Mission to ask the Catechist to take four months leave against his own wish. In his letter to Rev J. A. Beckles the Catechist said “I am unwilling to leave the Tamil congregation without a teacher.” In January 1868 “it was decided, it was absolutely necessary to close the Tamil Mission which is the much more expensive part of the Society’s Work” and hence the services of the Catechist were dispensed with. Mr. Tychichus, therefore, began to work independently and the small congregation was left without a worker.

Four years later in 1872, the Rev. W. Henry Gomez took charge of the Mission work. He was born in 1827. A Singhalese by birth and a student of the Bishop’s College, Calcutta, he was ordained in 1850 and was working in Ceylon and Borneo before he came to Singapore. He was a good scholar.

Under his supervision, the Mission Chapel was built in 1875 at Stamford Road and in 1882 he started “The Jurong Mission.” The congregation was improving. In the report of the “Board Missions” published in 1894, it is said that “Mission work is carried on at Singapore among the Tamils, Chinese or Malay-speaking people. There are Sunday and Weekday services in those three languages. Singapore has 2,263 Church members and 656 communicants.” All services were held in the newly built Chapel. He died in 1902.

No one was in charge of the work until the arrival of the Rev. R. Richards in 1904. He served the mission for a number of years. His main sphere of work was among the Chinese. Having seen them in great numbers, he was drawn by the zeal for evangelism to learn the Chinese language. Tamil work under his supervision was mainly carried on by lay workers namely Messrs. Gnanapragasm, R. Balavendram and D.S. Ponniah. Mr. D.S Ponniah was also Headmaster of St Andre’s School. There was no Tamil worker until the year 1910. It was also during his period in 1905 the Mission Chapel in Stamford Road was consecrated as ‘St Peter’s Church’ by Bishop Hose before retirement.

It was in April 1910, the Rev. A. R. Thavasiappan, the first Indian priest arrived at Singaporean take charge of the Tamil work. He worked till September 1914. There was no priest until April 1916. Then came the Rev. R. K. Abraham who worked from April 1916 to May 1920. After a lapse of two years came the Rev. D. J. Devapriam. He was in charge of the Tamil congregation from May 1922 to August 1926. He was succeeded by Rev. S. Charles in May 1928. Rev Charles was succeeded by the late Rev. Canon C. D. Gnanamani, who was in charge of the Parish till February 1939, since February 18, 1939 the present incumbent is continuing his work.

During the periods when there was no priest, the lay workers namely Dr. J. M. Handy and Mr Gnanasimoney were assisting the congregation by conducting Mattins, and the English Chaplains used to celebrate the Holy Communion once or twice a month. At other times, the late Rev. D. P. Samuel used to visit the Parish at irregular intervals from Seremban. When Canon Gnanamani was on leave in 1932 the Rev. E. G. Proctor was in charge of the Parish.

While Rev. Canon C.D. Gnanamani was Priest-in-charge of the Tamil congregation, the Government requisitioned the Church and School compound. As the four worshipping congregations had to leave the compound, they decided to build two separate churches -- one for the Tamils and the other for the Hi see. This decision was approved by the Diocese with the intention of developing their work linguistically. The present site at Dorset Road was therefore bought for the Tamils and a plan expressing Indian architecture was drawn but it was so expensive that it had to be altered to the present plan.

The foundation stone of the present Church was laid on St. Luke's Day October 18, 1940 by the Rt. Rev. B. C. Roberts who was then the Bishop of Singapore and it was dedicated on the 5th April 1941. The work was hurried as the congregation had to leave St. Peter's Church by February 1941. Sunday services were held at St. Andrew's School Chapel for nearly two months, with the cooperation of late Rev. A. C. Parr.

The East Asia was started on the 8th December 1941. And the new Church building was badly damaged by enemy action. Major part of the roof came down. But temporary repairs were made in three months' time and services were held very regularly.

Besides Tamil work, its Priest was taking care of the Malayalam and Hindustani speaking congregations as well. He was assisted by lay workers like the late Mr. I. N. Benjamin and Mr. J. G. Pisharody in the Malayalam work. After 1953, the Anglican Malayalam members with the consent of the Diocesan invited a worker from India in 1955. He is already succeeded by three priests. They conduct their services in Christ Church.

It was possible to find a separate Priest for Hindustani work. Lay workers as Messrs. Gulam Masih and Isaac were assisting during during the war and after. There was a catechist for nearly two years. It was a congregation of over 200 members but they dwindled to about 50 members scattered all over Singapore. Most of them have left for other places in search of employment. Services are regularly held for them in Christ Church and prYer meetings are conducted in their places. One Mr. Du path is assisting the priest.

The Tamil Priest was helping the Tamil work in Johore until 1956 and at Selatar Air and Naval Bases. The priests were and are assisted by many lay-workers as Messrs C. C. James, S. Cathiresoo, G. D. Selvarajan, V. Stephens, G. Sandhosham, P. D. Rajamoney and D. Jeyraj during these three years both at Seletar and at Christ Church. It is at Jalan Kayu, Selatar they intend to build another church.

This short summary tells us that Tamil work of the Anglican Church commenced over hundred years ago. Yet its growth is not as it should be. It may be due to its nature. It was not really evangelistic in its outlook. It was a Chaplaincy extended to the Tamils. Therefore it was not able to stand on its own legs. They had to go without a shepherd for a long time.

The congregation was of a floating nature. The Church being not in nature evangelistic, was not prepared to suffer and shed its blood. It has not really become Easter in outlook. It has to realize its own responsibility and become a witnessing Church. The Time has come for Christ Church to deeply think over its past and put everything right. The people must be prepared to sacrifice and to serve and to take Christ to all. May the Church be helped by God to carry out its intention.

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