

THOMAS STEPHENS—A HUMAN MONUMENT OF INCULTURATION IN INDIA

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400年ごろのインドでは有名なマハーバーラタ物語がほぼ現形のごとくまとめられた。しかし、その叙事詩の要素をさらに発展させて成立したのがプラーナ聖典である。プラーナはヒンドゥー教の聖典であり、現代インドの民間信仰と極めて密接な関係がある。国家主義とインカルチュレーションの立場からみれば、16世紀インドで活躍したトーマス・スティーブンス（1549-1619）という英国人のイエズス会の宣教師が書いた「キリスト・プラーナ」という名作は、現代世界のキリスト教文献のなかで貴重なものとして考えられている。それはヒンドゥー教のプラーナのやりかたを模倣して書かれたイエズス・キリストの生涯の物語である。商人の息子で、スティーブンスはオックスフォードで学び、イエズス会に入会してから南インドの西海岸にあるゴアに宣教師として派遣された。現在のインドでは、彼はコンカニ語とマラーチ語の最高の作家のなかに数えられている。

Introduction

Among other definitions, the Oxford English Reference Dictionary speaks of a ‘monument’ as “anything enduring that serves to commemorate or make celebrated, and especially a structure or a building.” Viewed from this perspective, to describe a human being as a monument would by no means be considered odd or anomalous, for History bears ample witness to the fact that in almost all civilizations and cultures, there have arisen in times of need people who in a multitude of ways have ushered in solace and hope, to their nations, peoples, or the religious faiths they adhere to.

In this article I wish to focus on an acclaimed human monument of India, an individual whose name and life are indelibly etched within the psyche of the average Indian. He was a Jesuit, or a member of the Society of Jesus, who on departing the shores of Europe after having severed ties with his family and friends, opted to pass what remained of his days within the balmy and scenic climes of tropical South India, to convey in a hitherto unknown tongue the teachings of Christ to the nation's diverse indigenous people. Notwithstanding what one might say with regard to the integrity of their motives, men like him nevertheless served as advocates of the local heritage and architects of Inculturation, who made constructive efforts to embrace and cherish the many homegrown beliefs and cultures they came upon. Apart from luminaries like the well known Roberto De Nobili, there appeared in India Jesuits such as Pierre Johanns, Georges Dandoy, Joseph Bayart, Pierre Fallon, Camille Bulcke, Henry Heras, Robert Antoine, Joseph Neuner, and numerous others, all of whom strove to discern within the cultural and religious diversity encircling them something more than mere delusion or ignorance, "a ray of that truth which enlightens all men." The person I wish to describe here is Thomas Stephens, an Englishman and author of one of the most outstanding works of literature in India, namely the *Christian Purana*.

Christianity in India during the Sixteenth Century

Christianity is traditionally believed to have entered India with the Apostle Thomas, who is currently viewed as the founder of the Church of the Christians of St. Thomas, also referred to as Malabar Christians. Four major Christian groups of the South Indian state of Kerala, namely the Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara, Syrian Jacobite, and Mar Thomite, trace their origins to him. These origins though are rather hazy. The Malabar Christians appear to have been in existence prior to the 6th century of the Christian era, and we have reasons to

believe that they are an outgrowth of the East Syrian or Nestorian Church. They have maintained links to the Chaldean liturgy and Syriac language, as also their ties to the Babylonian patriarchate in Baghdad. During the centuries, mass migrations of these Syrian Christians to the Malabar Coast occurred, a phenomenon that shored up the ties of these Christians to the Middle East.

The Portuguese missionaries set sail for India during the early 16th century. At first their bonds with the Malabar Christians were cordial, but soon their efforts to subject them to the authority of Rome, to replace their local bishops with those holding Portuguese nationality, and to Latinize the Malabar liturgy, evoked the resentment of the people. In 1599, the Synod of Diamper convened by the Portuguese Archbishop removed them from the hold of the Chaldean (Nestorian) patriarch, and placed them under the Portuguese who followed the Latin rite. Hence the liturgy was Latinized, priestly celibacy enforced, and the Inquisition was imposed. In reaction to this, in 1653 the majority of the Malabar Christians severed ties with Rome, swearing never to submit to Portuguese dominion. Thanks however to the efforts of Pope Alexander VII, by 1662 the majority of the alienated Christians had returned to the Roman fold.

The Indian Christians of the 16th and 17th centuries may hence be classed under two principal groups, namely the St. Thomas Christians who were descendants of the ancient Christians of India, and the new Christians who were evangelized by missionaries arriving from Europe. According to rough estimates, in the 17th century the St. Thomas Christians numbered around 150,000. In the second half of the 16th century, after the split in the East Syrian Church, they were governed mostly by bishops sent by the line of patriarchs in communion with Rome. However, there at times arose also bishops from the rival line, and these often sought (though unsuccessfully) to establish themselves in parts of Kerala.

The Portuguese approach was marked by belligerence, a desire to

overcome and dictate. Regarding religion, they claimed to be in custody of the whole truth, having the right answers to all questions. Hence, whatever did not correspond to their ideas was viewed as misconduct, as a fault to be remedied as early as possible. The Thomas Christians however, while being firmly linked to Christianity and its traditional customs and structures, were nevertheless improperly instructed in the basic tenets of the faith, and they lacked also a suitable theology of their own. Hence many were willing to be instructed by the Europeans and to get whatever support was possible from them, provided however there was no interference in their religious institutions and way of life, which had now become an intrinsic feature of their existence.

During the time the Thomas Christians were in contact with the European missionaries their understanding of Christianity did indeed rise to a considerable extent, and certain distasteful practices among them came to an end.¹ The Europeans though were dissatisfied by these results. Utilizing a mixture of inducement, allure, and force they Latinized to a great extent the religious rites of the Thomas Christians, and by 1599 they had drawn them all under the sponsorship of the ruler of Portugal. Later, attempts by Jesuit Archbishops to demote the native archdeacon and concentrate power in their own hands, instigated the general revolt of 1653. After these events the Thomas Christians became a divided community, with about two thirds continuing their links with Rome, and others insisting on their affiliations with the Antiochian Syrian Church.

The majority of these new Christians were from regions under the direct control of Portugal or areas where Portuguese influence was strong, areas wherein existed a mood of liaison between Church and State. In areas directly ruled by the Portuguese significant moral coercion was exerted in the propagation of Christianity, and even in areas not governed by them but where they exercised sizable influence,

1 Thekkedath does not specify what these practices were. Confer p. 481.

that influence was exerted in favor of Christianity. However in the interior of the subcontinent, namely in areas under the sovereignty of Hindu or Muslim kings the Portuguese exercised little or no control, and hence the missionaries living there also experienced meager success.

It took pioneers of Inculturation and Inter-religious understanding like Robert De Nobili, to show that it was the flawed and insensitive modus operandi of the Europeans that led to this failure. By imitating the life-style of Hindus, by blending Hindu customs and rituals with Christianity, and by a nonpareil grasp of the local languages and culture, De Nobili managed to surmount barriers that isolated the missionaries from the people. He began a movement that steadily gained momentum, and by the close of the 17th century Christians in the Madurai mission where he worked are said to have numbered over 100,000, despite the harassment and persecutions they often faced.

Among the allegations leveled against his methods by right-wing Catholics, was the fact that De Nobili displayed an undue leniency towards caste bias, and thus diluted the Christian concept of universal brotherhood. Yet, as Thekkedath points out, “one wonders whether any other approach was practicable in the interior parts of the country in the seventeenth century.”² His methods though were certainly adopted by Jesuits working in other parts of India. Unfortunately however, throughout the 16th century, scarcely any effort was made to adapt Christianity to the Indian situation. Baptism often meant the rejection of one’s former culture and adoption of a Portuguese name. European Missionaries were often unable to discriminate between facets of doctrine and culture, and consequently sought to suppress anything that to them smacked of idolatry or superstition.

Happily however, even among the missionaries there were notable exceptions. In 1566 Melchior Nunez Barreto complained that certain

2 Thekkedath, p. 484

newly arrived missionaries tended to judge as idolatrous anything that differed from the ways of the Spanish peninsula, and Jesuits like Robert De Nobili, Costanzo Joseph Beschi, and Thomas Stephens, proved that imparting the teachings of Christ to the Indian people did not in any way imply depriving them of their culture, customs, or traditional way of life. By their unique and original works on philosophical and theological issues written in the indigenous languages, they were pivotal in the creation of a valid Indian Christian literature, and today, along with other famed personalities such as Henry Henriques of the pearl fishery coast, Gaspar de S. Miguel, Diogo Ribeiro, and Jerome Xavier (the grand-nephew of Francis Xavier and a scholar highly esteemed for his Persian works), they have acquired a place among the foremost savants of the South Asian subcontinent.

The Life of Thomas Stephens

Thomas Stephens was often described as the ‘first Englishman in India,’ but as Schurhammer pointed out, Sir Monier-Williams qualified this description by speaking of him as the ‘first Englishman known to have reached India via the Cape of Good Hope.’ According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in 883 AD, King Alfred sent Sighelm of Sherborne as his ambassador to the tomb of the Apostle Thomas in India,³ and according to William of Malmesbury’s Chronicle, Sighelm returned laden with precious stones and sweet-smelling essences.⁴ Since then however, further evidence of early travellers to India has come to light. In the National Archives of Lisbon, in an autographed letter of Alvaro Penteado to the Portuguese king written around 1518, it is stated that about seven years earlier he had visited the Syrian Christians in

3 Confer *The History and Antiquities of the Cathedral Church of Wells*, by John Britton, F.S.A., M. A. Nattali, 19, Southampton-Street, Covent-garden, 1836, p. 14

4 Confer http://www.archive.org/stream/williamofmalmesb1847will/williamofmalmesb1847will_djvu.txt, (September 2011).

Cranganore of South India, when “their priest had gone to the tomb of St. Thomas along with Dom Jorge.” Gaspar Correa, writing of his own pilgrimage to Mylapore⁵ in 1523, declares that the moor on guard at the tomb of the Apostle informed him of an English Duke called Dom Jorge, who about twelve to fifteen years earlier had come in pilgrim garb.⁶

Thomas Stephens was born in 1549, the son of a wealthy English merchant. In his youth he experienced a strong desire to dedicate his life to God, but he was forced to leave England on account of the Elizabethan persecution. He arrived in Rome, and on October 20, 1575, at the age of 26, he entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus. He began his priestly studies in Rome, but during the second year of his philosophical studies his request to work in the mission lands of Portuguese East India was granted. He thereupon went to Lisbon, and with eleven young Jesuits he embarked upon his voyage to Goa. They reached Goa on October 24, 1579, after which he sent a lively description of his voyage to his Father. He was known in India as Padre Estevao or Estevam but also as Thomas Bushton or Stephen de Buston. From the records of his life one gathers details of an uneventful but busy career.⁷

An individual who exerted a profound influence upon him, and with whom he maintained close fraternal ties until the very end of his life, was Thomas Pounce. Pounce was the son of a wealthy country gentleman of Belmont and the nephew of the Earl of Southampton. He was educated at the College of Our Lady of Winchester, and in his halcyon days he had set his heart on becoming a favorite at the court of Queen Elizabeth. He joined Lincoln’s Inn on February 16, 1559-60,

5 A suburb of the city of Chennai in South India, in which the mortal remains of the Apostle Thomas are traditionally believed to have been interred. The name means the ‘city of peacocks.’

6 Jesuit Presence in Indian History, p. 197

7 Kirby’s list of Winchester scholars apparently mentions a Thomas Stephens aged thirteen as having been a student there. Confer Winchester scholars, London 1888, page 139. Quoted by Ram Chandra Prasad, p. 1.

but on the death of his father he succeeded to Belmont, and was chosen as a courtier in a group devoted to the queen. He played the part of Mercury in Gascoigne's Masque that was performed before her in 1565 at Kenilworth, but during the Christmas season festivities of 1569, while performing a rather intricate dance in her presence, he had the misfortune to stumble and fall. The Queen thereupon is said to have publicly insulted him, after which Pounce, who was deeply mortified, decided to retire from court.

He withdrew from court in 1569, and after two years of prayerful seclusion he sallied forth once again as a lay-apostle and leader of the Catholic gentry, in their efforts to conserve the time-honored faith of the realm. For two years Stephens travelled with Pounce disguised as a servant, so as not to evoke the doubts of the Protestants. Unluckily however, when they happened to visit the 'moving ground' in Herefordshire while staying at Ludlow,⁸ they were arrested and interned as spies, but were fortunately released a few hours later.

Their problems however did not terminate there, because Pounce was greatly enthused by certain letters written by Jesuits working in India that he chanced to come upon. Moved by his religious zeal and love for the Jesuits, he promptly chalked out what seemed like a splendid and workable plan for them. He decided to set sail for Flanders or France, and on landing there approach all the suitable youth that he could find, lead them to Rome, and once in Rome enter the Society of Jesus along with them. To realize all this he was aware that he would be in need of ample funds, and so he decided to sell off part of his property. Pounce desired to go to Rome in the company of Stephens, but sad to say he had already become something of a fugitive, a man sought after by the authorities. Hence, when he travelled to London for the final stage of

8 In 1571, the marshy hill in the east of this shire, comprising about twenty-six acres together with the sheep, hedgerows and trees thereon, moved a distance of four hundred yards in the space of three days. Cf. John Speed, cited in Foley. Quoted by Georg Schurhammer, p. 199

his departure he was betrayed by his host, and thrown into prison by the Bishop of London. In due course however he was set free through the good offices of his uncle the Earl of Southampton, who stood guarantee that his nephew would not leave the country, but would rather confine himself to his home in Belmont.

Stephens therefore had no choice but to travel to Rome alone, and there, on October 20, 1575, at the age of twenty-six, he was received as a novice at the international Roman novitiate of Sant' Andrea, with Fr. Fabio de Fabiis as his novice-master. Among his companions were the 'Lombard' Pietro Berno from Ascona on the Lago Maggiore, and Thomas Field the Irishman, who was headed to work as a pioneer missionary for fifty years in Paraguay. He also met seven of his fellow-countrymen, and these save for Richard Cudner who entered a year later and died in Paris in 1587, had all been to Oxford and consequently knew Edmund Campion. They formed a notable group. Among them was Robert Persons, the Fellow and Dean of Balliol College who was destined to be a leading crusader for the Catholic cause in England, and who died as Rector of the English College in Rome in 1610; Giles Gallop, Fellow of New College, who died in Rome in 1579; Henry Garnet also of New College, who died a martyr's death in England in 1606; William Weston, who after 17 years of incarceration in England died in Valladolid in 1615, deeply revered for his virtue; John Lane, Fellow of Corpus Christi College, who joined the Jesuits in February 1576 and died in Alcala in 1579; and Humphrey Woodward who entered in August 1577, and died in Milan as professor of Scripture in 1587.⁹

Pounde had eagerly entreated Stephens to obtain for him from the Superior General, Fr. Everard Mercurian the favor of entry into the Society of Jesus. In response to this, the initial petition presented by Stephens on behalf of his friend failed in its object and is now unavailable, but a second petition dated November 4, 1578, which was

9 Confer Schurhammer, p. 200

presented while Stephens was busy studying philosophy at the Roman College, is preserved. This second petition reveals words of deep praise for his comrade, who languished as a convict in the tower of London. Stephens described Pounce as follows: “He is thirty-eight years of age, of a tall and handsome figure, a flowing beard and a pleasing countenance.”¹⁰ This second petition was effective, and so a month later the General sent a letter to Pounce accepting him into the Society of Jesus, and he was welcomed in absentia. His admission occurred after three years, and it was largely due to the backing of Stephens. This letter sheds a flood of light on the life, virtues, and other notable qualities of Pounce.¹¹ A further petition of Stephens also won favor, for in 1579, while busy with his second year of philosophy and while studying Physics taught by Antoine Menu and mathematics taught by the illustrious Christopher Clavius,¹² he was granted permission by the General to join the mission of Portuguese East India.

Long after Stephens had gained fame as a preacher in Goa, Pounce wrote the following letter exalting his friend’s virtues:

“My first imprisonment was in the town of Ludlow, and the shortest of all other, but for one forenoon’s space; but much the sweeter for my fellow and partner in that imprisonment, Father Thomas Stevens, these thirty-nine years since a famous preacher of the Society at Goa, where their colony of St. Paul’s is, at the

10 Confer Schurhammer, p. 200

11 See Henry Foley, *op. cit.*, p. 580. Quoted by Rama Chandra Prasad, p. 2. This letter is preserved in the Public Record Office, Brussels, and a copy of it is found in the *Collectio Cardwelli*, Volume 1, page 16, of Stonyhurst College.

12 Christopher Clavius, was a mathematician and astronomer, whose most significant achievement was linked to the reform of the calendar under Pope Gregory XIII. He entered the Society of Jesus in 1555, and his flair for mathematical research revealed itself even in his preliminary studies at Coimbra. Called to Rome by his superiors to serve as a teacher in the Roman College, he taught there until his death. Tycho Brahe, Johann Kepler, Galileo Galilei, and Giovanni Antonio Magini, esteemed him highly. He was referred to as the “Euclid of the sixteenth century,” and opponents like Scaliger declared that they would prefer censure by Clavius, to praise from another.

East Indies, of whose great favours, there showed to many of our English Protestants there sometimes arriving, they have in the history of their navigation given good testimony.”¹³

As stated earlier, on arriving in Goa on October 24, 1579, Stephens dispatched an animated account of his voyage to his father. Equipped with a questioning mind and imbued with a keen sense of research, he made a meticulous study of India’s traditions, as also its geography, history, flora and fauna, and chiefly the languages. In due course he attained a firm grasp of languages like Konkani, Marathi, and possibly also Hindustani, although we have yet to find a work of his in the latter idiom. Of the letters he wrote from India we currently have the following: A letter written to his father Thomas Stephens, a prominent merchant of London, dated November 10, 1579, and a letter to his brother Dr. Richard Stephens, a priest of Paris. Two more letters of his have recently come to light, and these provide us with a clearer image of his views and principles.¹⁴

As for the totality of his writings, Joseph Saldanha has provided us with the following list, which though far from exhaustive is nevertheless as complete as can be.

1. A letter to his father, Thomas Stephens, dated November 10, 1579.
2. A letter to his brother Doctor Richard Stephens, a doctor of Theology in Paris, dated October 24, 1583.
3. A Catechism of the Christian Doctrine which first appeared under the title, *Christian Doctrine in the Brahman-Kanarese language*,

¹³ Henry Foley, *Records of the English Province*, (London, 1875), Vol. II, (Second, third, and fourth series), p. 595

¹⁴ Antonio Pereira, pp. (52-53). A. K. Priolkar published two newly discovered letters of Stephens, in the journal of the University of Bombay of September 1956. One is a Discourse on the coming of Christ into the world, divided into two treatises. It was printed at Rachol, at the College of All Saints of the Society of Jesus, 1616, and the other is a Christian Doctrine in the Brahmin Canarim Language, arranged in the manner of a dialogue to teach children, printed in the College of Rachol in 1622.

*arranged in dialogue to teach children.*¹⁵ This is the Konkani translation of a Portuguese work by Marcos Jorge, and it was published in 1622, three years after the death of the author.

4. *A Grammar of the Konkani language.* This is perhaps the first work by a European scholar on the grammar of an Indian language. For years it remained in manuscript form, and the Jesuit Diogo Ribeiro is said to have added to it. However neither Stephens nor Ribeiro lived to see it in print, for it was only in 1640 that it issued forth from the press of St. Ignatius College at Rachol.¹⁶
5. *The Christian Purana,*¹⁷ which is unquestionably his magnum opus, and one of the greatest works of literature known in India.

In his letter to his father Stephens described the seafaring routes in and around Madagascar (St. Lawrence Island),¹⁸ and although he displays no particular keenness in his depiction of the people, products, or markets, yet he revealed a deep interest in the birds and fish. At the close of his letter however he disclosed his initial feelings regarding the people and places he encountered. “The people,” he wrote, “be tawny, but not disfigured in their lips and noses, as the Moors and Kaffirs of Ethiopia. They that be not of reputation, or at least the most part, go naked, save an apron of a span long and as much in breadth before them, and a lace two fingers broad before them, girded about with a string, and no more.”¹⁹

15 The author is declared to be Thomas Stephens, a Jesuit in the College of Rachol, and the year of publication is 1622.

16 Saldanha states that only two copies of the first edition are known to exist, but that a second edition was brought out in 1857. Sir Monier-Williams in his article “Facts of Indian Progress” declares: “I have seen an edition of his (Fr. Stephens) grammar at the India Office Library but have never met with his other works.” (Quoted by Saldanha).

17 *The Christian Purana of Fr. Thomas Stephens of the Society of Jesus*, by Joseph L. Saldanha, p. XXXVII.

18 On August 10, 1500, Portuguese Captain Diogo Dias became the first European to land in Madagascar, after he was blown off course on his way to India. He gave it the name ‘St. Lawrence Island,’ since it was discovered on St. Lawrence’s day.

19 Ram Chandra Prasad, p. 4

His letters to his father are said to have aroused significant interest in India among the English people. In *The English in Western India*, Philip Anderson informs us that a letter from Stephens to his father in London filled people with amazement that “a Roman ecclesiastic should enter with such eagerness and penetration into commercial affairs,” and further adds that “his advices were the strongest inducements which London merchants had been offered to embark on Indian speculations.” Since Stephens’ father was a leading merchant in London, he too at an early age was undoubtedly affected by ideas of travel and trade. These letters perchance evoked within the minds of his father’s friends and business associates glowing pictures of hopes and prospects with regard to trade with India.²⁰

In a letter to his brother dated October 24, 1583, he writes that he fell gravely ill during his first year in Goa, and that soon after his recovery he was granted the Holy Orders and sent to the peninsula state of Salsette, just north of Bombay, that was under the dominion of the Spanish King. He writes of hostile pagans, namely Hindus, who opposed the Portuguese and harmed Christians by their attacks and intrigues. However, he also noted that the Portuguese had destroyed all the Hindu temples in those areas. He presents a sad account of the martyrdom of three renowned Jesuits, namely Rudolph Acquaviva, Pietro Berno, and Francis Aranha,²¹ though he himself managed to elude the ordeals inflicted at times upon the Jesuits by angry Hindus.²² In 1579, the Viceroy and his Council banned what they viewed as idolatrous customs and practices, in Salsette. The Hindus hoped to get this law revoked by the king of Spain, who since 1580 was ruler of Portugal and its Indian colonies, but on finding their hopes defeated, five villages (including the village of Cuncolim) revolted, and burned

20 Confer Saldanha, *The Christian Purana of Fr. Thomas Stephens of the Society of Jesus*, p. XXVI.

21 These are the three famous martyrs of Salsette

22 Ram Chandra Prasad, pp. 6-7

the churches and residences of the Christian mission stations in their areas. The revolt was subdued, but on July 12, 1583, when Acquaviva, the superior, went to Cuncolim with three Jesuits, a lay brother, two Portuguese and 48 Indian Christians to re-open the mission, it was a disaster. The enraged villagers massacred the Jesuits and several of their group, and Stephens, who now served as the Rector of Rachol College,²³ had them solemnly buried in his church.

Stephens however was devoid of the rashness and militancy that at times characterized some of the early missionaries. He had a deep love for the people and culture of the land, and he was struck by the originality and similarity of the Konkani and Marathi languages with Greek and Latin. The coconut finds special mention in his letter. He writes,

“We have here a tree oftener seen than the elm or the vine, called the palm on account of the likeness to it, or perhaps because it is really so, if you admit that palm is a generic word and consists of two species. It gives oil, liquor (vinum) toddy (lac), syrup (mel), sugar and vinegar. Inside the fruit contains water like light beer and good to quench one’s thirst. It is so plentiful that after drinking from one fruit you would not look for another. In the interior of the nut is a kernel, lining it all over like a covering and forming a prized article of food. The shell furnishes the blacksmith with charcoal. Those that live near the sea utilize it for making ropes and sails. You will hardly find any piece of writing except on its leaves.”²⁴

As Saldanha points out, Stephens’ comments on the coconut which is reported to contain water that resembles light beer, and which is

²³ The College of Rachol is none other than the old St. Ignatius College erected at Rachol during the reign and mostly at the expense of King Sebastian of Portugal.

²⁴ Antonio Pereira, p. 54

good for quenching one's thirst, his views on India's language with its "wonderful" phrases and construction, and of the climate in which "the heat, is so much tempered by refreshing winds that it is milder than in Italy or Spain," reveal direct experience and a sincere love for the country and its people. All these "had for him many charms which no doubt contributed to make his work of forty long years in India a labor of love."²⁵

One of the most incredible events of his life, an event due to which his name became virtually etched within the minds of a large number of his grateful countrymen, consisted in the steps he took to assist certain English merchants who encountered problems in India. These were Ralph Fitch, John Newberry, James Story, and William Leedes. They entered the country by land, but since the Portuguese suspected them of being "spies sent by Don Antonio" they were promptly seized and imprisoned. Stephens strove hard for them, using all the influence at his disposal, and finally succeeded in bringing about their release. John Newberry in a letter to Master Leonard Poore of London dated January 20, 1584, and sent from Goa, describes the incident as follows.

"The archbishop, is a very good man, who hath two yong men to his servants, the one of them was borne at Hamsborough, and is called Bernard Borgers: and the other was borne at Enchuyen, whose name is John Linscot (that is, Jan Huyghen van Linschoten), who did us great pleasure: for by them the archbishop was many times put in minde of us. And the two good fathers of S. Paul, who travelled very much for us, the one of them is called Padre Marke, who was born in Bruges in Flanders, and the other was born in Wiltshire in England, and is called Padre Thomas Stevens."²⁶

25 J. A. Saldanha, *Notes on the First Anglo-Indian* (Mangalore 1910), p. 4

26 Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations*, London 1599, vol. II, p. 243

Ralph Fitch too thankfully acknowledged the efforts of Stephens for himself and his friends,²⁷ and Sir Robert Sherley, another Englishman who later also encountered problems in Goa, is said to have received from him in 1616 a letter of endorsement via another Jesuit.²⁸ It did not take long for this munificent nature of Stephens to grow axiomatic. Foreigners never failed to emphasize his willingness to aid the distressed,²⁹ and John Hugh Van Linschoten, a Dutchman who served as a page to the Archbishop of Goa, greatly extolled his benignity. After the publication of the account of Ralph Fitch by Richard Hakluyt, news of this English Jesuit who was ever at the service of downtrodden and depressed, and who was ever ready to assist his countrymen in the absence of an official ambassador, became known far and wide.³⁰

In 1609, Stephens once again performed an act of kindness to four Englishmen, as also to a Dutchman and the famous French traveller Pyrard de Laval and two of his fellow citizens, just as he had done earlier to Fitch and his companions.³¹ This was at the end of the monsoon season, when the Viceroy of Goa decided to jail all foreigners who had sailed into India on ships other than those owned by Portuguese. In an account of his voyage published after his return to Paris, Pyrard described how the Jesuits had gone out of their way to help him. He wrote:

27 Ibid. P. 250

28 Boies Penrose, *The Sherleian Odyssey*, Taunton, 1938, p. 202

29 As stated earlier, the French traveller, Francois Pyrard de Laval, mentions Stephens as one of the Jesuits who “worked together with such effect that we were set free after an imprisonment of nigh three weeks.” He also alludes to the imprisonment of Ralph Fitch and his friends and their release “by the means of that good Father Thomas Estienne, who took much pains therein.” See *Voyage of F. Pyrard of Laval*, London 1888, vol. II, pt. 1, p. 271.

30 Confer Ram Chandra Prasad, pp. (7-9). Commenting on F. Pyrard’s narrative of his voyage to the East Indies, Albert Gray declares: “Then, we have a pleasing picture of the Jesuit, Fr. Stephen, the first Englishman in India, the learned Fr. La Croiz, and the more famous Fr. Trigaut, who, with humility and tact, performed the part of English and French Ambassadors.” See Introduction to the *Voyage of F. Pyrard of Laval*, vol. II, pt. 1, p. XIX

31 Schurhammer, p. 205

“The Jesuit Fathers spared not trouble to set us free. Five of them: the Procurator of the Christians, Gaspar Aleman, Father Thomas Stephens, an Englishman, Father Jean de Cenes, a Lotharingian from Verdun, Fr. Nicolas Trigaut, a Walloon from Douay, and good Father Estienne de la Croix, a Frenchman from Rouen, joined forces for this purposes and got us out of jail in three weeks. Undoubtedly these good Fathers would have gladly helped us all the way home in spite of the trouble we caused them. They could not have done more for us had we been their own brothers.”³²

Stephens was in Salsette until his death in 1619, and the harrowing experiences of the early days of his mission proved a turning point in his work for the people. His own approach to the Hindus differed from that of his co-workers. Reports present him as being of a discreet and practical mentality, imbued with intelligence and apostolic zeal. His sole aim was to convey the teachings of Christ to the people, and he fulfilled this not in a mood of cynicism or doubt, but by unaffected acceptance and trust. He was the only English Jesuit who worked in India prior to the suppression of the Society in 1773,³³ and aside from brief absences, he led a rather peaceful and uneventful life in the peninsula of Salsette until his death in 1619. On his arrival Salsette had 8000 Christians, but fourteen years later the number increased to 35,000, and by the time of his death the peninsula was almost entirely Catholic.³⁴

The Christian Purana

The preeminent literary work of Thomas Stephens is the *Christian*

32 Voyage (Paris 1679), 173-178

33 The *Christian Purana of Fr. Thomas Stephens of the Society of Jesus*, by Joseph L. Saldanha, p. XXXVIII.

34 The Month, April 1955, vol. XIII, No. 4, p. 204

Purana, or *Krista-Purana* as it is known in India. *Purana* is a Sanskrit word meaning ‘ancient,’ and it refers to a set of Hindu scriptures that are replete with myths and legends concerning the gods and goddesses. All bona fide *Puranas* are understood as having fixed *lakshana* or marks, features that distinguish them from other scriptures, but in actual fact not all *Puranas* are found to possess these marks. That is to say, each is required to have an explanation concerning the origin of the universe, the genealogy of the gods and sages, the rule of the Manus,³⁵ the destruction of the universe and its recreation along with the history of mankind, and dynastic legends concerning the Solar and Lunar dynasties.³⁶ The *Puranas* are pantheistic in content, they are all written in verse, all are viewed as having been revealed by gods, sages, or supernatural beings, and the contents of all are presented in the form of an interchange between a questioner and an expounder. They are often in prophetic form as though recounting future events, and there are eighteen *Puranas* in all, varying in length and content.

Knowing the evolution of the work in Salsette is vital in getting a grasp of Stephens’ work, and the import of the Christian *Purana*. Salsette lay in the south of the area of Goa under Portuguese rule, and it had 80,000 inhabitants in 66 villages, all of whom were Hindus under the influence of Brahmins.³⁷ When the area was offered to the Jesuits in 1560 it had about a hundred Christians, and the majority lived in the vicinity of Rachol, which was a Portuguese bastion. Diego Rodriguez the chief of Rachol embarked on a bellicose policy, ordering all temples

35 The word ‘Manu’ comes from the Sanskrit word *man*, meaning to ‘think.’ It is the name given to certain semi-divine creatures, which in Hindu mythology are referred to as progenitors of mankind and rulers of the earth. Each Manu rules for a period of time called a *manvantara*.

36 *Manu Vaivasvata*, or Manu the son of Vivasvat the sun god, was the Noah of Hindu mythology. He was the seventh of the traditional Manus, and the Manu of the present age, which is called *Kaliyuga*. He had nine sons. His eldest son Ishvāku was the founder of the so-called Solar race, while the Lunar race was founded by Chandra or Soma, the son of a sage called Atri.

37 A member of the highest caste of Hindu society.

in Salsette to be destroyed. The Muslim ruler of the kingdom of Bijapur razed to the ground a college and hospital that had been erected in the capital city of Margao, but as he was killed in 1580 the conflict promptly came to an end. Feelings of hostility towards the mission workers however persisted, and this was the situation when Stephens appeared in 1580, but by that time the number of Christians had increased to 5000.

On the death of Acquaviva and his companions on July 12, 1583, Stephens (who is recorded as having served at the time as the Rector of the community at Rachol), took urgent steps to re-establish peace. He spoke to the people in a mood of conciliation and love, and ultimately succeeded in giving his deceased companions a decent burial, after having retrieved their bodies from a well into which they had been carelessly discarded. The sight of the maimed bodies must indeed have caused him intense pain, for among them was the corpse of his co-novice, Pietro Berno. This gruesome incident however proved to be a watershed in his career. In all future dealings with Hindus he adopted an entirely novel approach, an approach marked by care and apostolic zeal. His sole aim was to convey the message of Christ to the people, and he set about doing so not in a mood of hostility or egoism, but harmony and dialogue.

Stephens took great pains to learn the local languages. He studied Konkani, which was the language of the common man, and his first literary work, which was a grammar of the Konkani language, proved a great help to Portuguese priests in fulfilling their pastoral tasks. Although he later also wrote a catechism in Konkani, it did not take him long to realize that he had to learn also Marathi. He was aware that the cultivated sections of the people spoke Marathi, a language of western India that was endowed with a lengthy history and affluent culture, besides a religious tradition that had produced some of the premier poets and mystics of the nation. Educated Christians yearned for this Marathi literature, because the Portuguese had forbidden its

use, and there was no way they could gain access to the literature available in Portuguese. Christian converts felt a need not just for the doctrinal aspects of their faith, but for a sacred literature rooted in their own culture, customs, and ways of life, something close to the Puranas that they earlier used to read as Hindus. It was from a need such as this that the Christian Purana arose, and Stephens himself explains its birth as follows.

On a certain occasion, a Brahmin who had earlier accepted Christ met Stephens, and admitted frankly that catechism had its worth. However, he insisted that people needed something diverting for their leisure hours, as otherwise they tended to squander them in futile talk and gambling. He recommended having a Christian literary work composed in one of India's languages and in narrative form, something that did not diverge much from the *Puranas* used by the Hindus. In other words, the elegance and worth of Christianity and its role in the daily issues of life needed to be presented in a form that appealed to people, and which would constitute a core of their society and culture. Stephens rose to the challenge. Drawing on his hitherto unsuspected lyrical and dramatic gifts he brought out a work that earned for him a select spot in Indian history, and ranked him among the leading poets of the subcontinent.

The *Christian Purana* has two sections. The earlier deals with the Old Testament, namely from creation to prophecies proclaiming the coming of Christ, while the second part narrates the life of Christ. Stephens initially wrote using the Devanagari³⁸ script, but due to a lack of Devanagari types he had little choice but to transcribe and print the work in Roman letters, although he did so using Marathi as the language. The work was an instant success. Its fame was such that apart from individual Christians and Hindus entire congregations are

38 The term literally means the script of the 'Divine City' of the gods. In common parlance it refers to the script that is generally used to write Sanskrit.

said to have read it aloud in churches after Holy Mass on Sundays and feast days, to the supreme delight of all.

Despite having had to start from scratch Stephens yet succeeded in gaining a peerless grasp of the grammar, philosophy, and symbolism of the Puranas, and besides, while writing the *Christian Purana*, he took great care to do so in a manner that enthralled both the refined and common class of citizens. He avoided archaic and convoluted words and phrases, and at each stage of the writing he took care to accentuate the basic Christian message of love. He ended his task sometime around 1605 to 1608, and his Purana finally appeared in print in the years 1616, 1649, and 1654, though in most cases the people circulated it among themselves using hand-written copies. Centuries later a Protestant version of the Christian Purana also appeared entitled *Christian Katha* (or Christian story), written in the Devanagari script.³⁹ Speaking of Stephens' *Purana* the Jesuit Hans Staffner writes: "With the exception of St. Augustine's City of God, I do not know of any other work that would equal the Purana in the forcefulness with which, the chief arguments in favor of Christ's divinity are presented."⁴⁰

I have introduced below an English translation by J. L. Saldanha of Canto 53, Stanzas 61-102, of the Christian Purana, which describes the encounter between the Risen Christ and Mary Magdalene in the garden. While it may lack the charm of the Marathi original, it nevertheless grants us an insight into the feelings and thoughts of the principal actors.

While stood she weeping, instantly
She turned about, and there did see
Before her Jesus' self; but she

39 Dr. Hivale in Pune published this in 1935, after having removed the strictly Roman Catholic passages. Confer Schurhammer, p. 209

40 Confer *Fr. Stephen's Christ Purana (Reflections on the coming Devanagari Edition)*, by the Reverend Hans Staffner S. J., The Examiner, Bombay, April 7, 1956.

Did not Him recognize.

“Why weepest thou?” of her He sought;
She looked; but doubt within her wrought,
Till straight the gardener Him she thought,
And answered in this wise:

“How shouldst thou seek O gardener kind,
Of my lament the cause to find,
When Him, my Lord, the Jews consigned
Without a cause to death?

“Was not His flesh with scourges torn?
And was his head not crowned with thorn?
To ask, then, whence my grief is born,
Were needless waste of breath.

“Did they not fix His hands and feet
Unto the cross? His thirst not meet
With gall and vinegar? Did not fleet
The fell lance through His side?

“Ah! Torments such as these He bare,
Who, without fault, was made to share
A death most cruel! How dost thou dare
My welling grief to chide?

“Those sacred feet—and death was there—
I washed with tears and wiped with hair,
With sharpest nails sore pierced were:
How should I then not weep?

“The very sun and moon did mark
His death with mourning deep and dark:
What, then, shall bind a grief more stark,
A hush awhile to keep?

“The death of Him that burst the rock,
And set earth trembling with a shock,
The thought of that dread death knock

Still at my inmost heart;
 “One stinging sorrow erst was mine,
 But now a second makes me pine:
 Of Him interred is here no sign,
 And I with all must part.
 “I know not who hath borne away
 My buried Lord: but now I pray
 That if thou hast Him, wilt thou say,
 Kind gardener, where He lies.
 “Him will I fetch from wheresoe’er
 He may be; nay e’en tho’ He were
 In Caiaphas’ courtyard hid, from there
 I’d bring Him in bold wise.
 “Could wealth obtain Him, I would spend:
 Nay, earn more, should more gain my end,
 By selling my own self to tend,
 As slave, the Jews in power.
 And should this e’en avail not, I
 By force or subtle trickery,
 To have my Master back would try,
 So fearless grown this hour.
 “What greater mishap could there be,
 Than my Lord Jesus’ loss to me?
 What rock I of what misery
 I may on earth surmise?”
 Thus she. But Lo, distinct and sweet,
 The old voice of Jesus doth repeat
 “Mary, Mary!” – Assured complete,
 “Master!” to Him she cries;
 Then straight unto his feet she flies
 In adoration meek.
 As weeps an infant daughter, sore.

Her mother's going, nor knows no more,
 But smiles and laughs when she comes o'er
 Tho' tears stream down her cheek;
 So Magdalene appeared to be,
 When, knowing by His voice, t'was He,
 She ran to worship lovingly
 His feet while tears did fall.
 But thus the Lord unto her spake:
 "Now speed thee, Mary, for my sake,
 And to mine own a message take,
 To tell my brethren all,
 That I will unto Him ascend
 In whom all Fatherhood doth blend
 With common Godhood without end—
 Our Father and our God."
 And Magdalene, with peaceful mind,
 Blest Jesus, to His Will resigned;
 Then hied to others of her kind,
 And spread the news abroad.⁴¹

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