India and East-West Interaction: The Jesuit Contribution, 16-18th Centuries
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1. Introduction

East-West interaction in the Indian sub-continent can be traced back to the ancient times when Alexander the Great led his army into India through the Punjab in north-west India in the 4th century B.C. Historical evidence especially numismatic sources also point to the contact of the people of Malabar with the Romans. Certainly, the two millennia-old living evidence of the Jews and the Syrian settlers at Cochin in south India since early first century indicate that there has been substantial and continuous interaction between India and the West. In this paper, I would limit myself to the East-West interaction thanks to the European missionaries who began to arrive in India after the landing of the Portuguese trader-sailor Vasco da Gama in 1498.

Though Italian missionaries of the Franciscan Order had been to India since the thirteenth century, the arrival of missionaries from Europe picked up momentum only after the establishment of the Portuguese colonial administration in India. The theme of modern missionary movement backed by Portuguese colonialists has been studied by scholars. In this paper, we shall focus on the transference of European methods of learning and natural sciences to India and the consequent enrichment of the Indian languages thanks to the Jesuit missionaries who came to India during 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.

2. Missionary Interaction and Colonial Agenda

The theme of East-West interaction brings to fore the contested issues of colonialism and missionary movement. Missionaries who came to India under the aegis of Portuguese colonial administration in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries were generally supported by the colonialists under the Padroado system. Some of the missionaries were carriers of European knowledge and ambassadors of European culture and did India proud by giving the best of European literary tradition, science and technology. That aside, some attempted to take back to Europe some of the literary and religious traditions of India. However, the quantity and quality of the contribution of the missionaries to India seems to have been substantial in comparison to what they took back to Europe: that is to say, it was only a one-way transaction. Racial prejudice did
often blight their understanding of the natives and made them underestimate the literary, philosophical and theological resources of the Indians. The missionaries came with a purpose to evangelize the “heathen” peoples. In the contemporary understanding, evangelization meant transplantation of the European brand of Christianity along with its culture and value systems. This resulted in cultural and religious imposition on the converts through the ill-famous instrument of Inquisition. For instance, converts in the early sixteenth century were expected to emulate Portuguese life-styles, dress-code, food habits and so on, not to speak of a complete change to the Latin Christian way of religious worship, rituals and customs. However, the more indigenizing missionaries like Henry Henriques, Robert De Nobili, Nicolas Lancillotti, Thomas Stephens and others did present Christianity through Indian and Asian idioms and world views since the middle of the 16th century. Not only did they learn the local languages and customs but also perceived Christianity through indigenous eyes which approach eventually contributed to the enrichment of the local languages and philology.

3. ‘Discovery’ of India and ‘Constructing’ India: The Jesuit Approach

A theme of East-West interaction necessarily includes a discussion on the ‘discovery’ of the Asian lands and their peoples. The so-called ‘discovery’ might have been a discovery for the Europeans but not for the indigenous peoples who were existing there earlier for centuries. Further, gathering information on various people groups in India and making it available at the home front, was one way of constructing India. Kate Teltscher comments that an India of a different kind was being constructed through European eyes thanks to the works of inscribing India by colonial and missionary scholars. First, there was a high demand from traders to gather information through these missionary agents with a view to expanding their trade; Secondly, the missionaries themselves needed to appease the supporters in Europe and to appeal to the home front especially, the Padroado authorities who largely financed their mission work. Thirdly, the missionary reports were meant to attract further volunteers to work in the missions, besides giving a report of the progress made by them. In any case, through the scholarly works, especially ethnographic writings, a new India was being constructed in the mind of the Europeans, apart from creating a new self-understanding among the Indians themselves.
The word 'contribution' needs clarification. Although the body of knowledge collected and transmitted by Jesuit scientists, scholars and geographers have contributed much to the general society, the colonialists had their own agenda of discoveries and gathering of information for which the ethnographic and geographic works of the Jesuits were made use of irrespective of the Jesuit intention. However, one cannot be oblivious of the linkages of some Jesuit missionaries with the colonizers: some studies of the Jesuits seem to have been done on demand from the colonial traders who wanted to have first hand information about the Indians.

4. Jesuit Contribution Historical Knowledge about India

Jesuit contribution to the knowledge about the history of India is not negligible. I shall focus on a few significant areas of Jesuit works which enhanced the process of East-West Interaction and exchange. Fr. Antonio Monserrate’s (1536-1600) “Commentarius” contain first hand information’s about Akbar and his court. Monserrate belonged to the first batch of Jesuits who came to the court of Akbar at the invitation of the Emperor. His works are compendiums of the diary he kept during his stay in the Mogul court. He has described accurately all the mountains, rivers and cities that lay along his route from Goa to Kabul. Monserate is credited with the honour of being the first European since Ptolemy to make a map of India.

The members of the Society in India, before its suppression in 1773, had also their well merited share of having given to the world such information as they could gather from their personal observations and testimonies about India, the land of their adoption, about its climate, vegetation, rivers, mountains and seasons, about the cities and villages, their inhabitants, their customs and manners, etc.

In the category of ethnographic reports and accounts of Indian religions, the contribution of Fr. Giacome Fenicio (1558-1632) is significant. An Italian Jesuit of the Calicut Mission, he wrote his magnum opus titled Livro da Seita dos Indios Orientais which is the first of the accounts on Hindu religion and customs ever written in a European language. The way in which he deals with the sources of Hindu mythology, betrays that scholarly spirit which is not always to be found even in later centuries: he was an eminent forerunner of the present European knowledge of India.

5. Jesuit Astronomers and Geographers

Among the various branches of Physical Sciences, Jesuits have had always a predilection for Astronomy and its sister science, Geography. The results of their observations about the conditions of the country where they lived and the affairs of the
men with whom they moved were often sent to their superiors and friends in Europe. These accounts were known as Annual Reports and Edifying Letters. They formed a mine of information from which both individual scientists and academies of sciences drew abundantly for their purposes, at times even without acknowledging their sources.  

Chronologically speaking, the first Jesuit geographer in India was Fr. Antonio Monserrate, even though his work was unnoticed for 200 Years. Because of his interest in comparative theology and probably also due to his apprehension about the Portuguese sea-borne power, Akbar invited in 1580, a Jesuit mission to his court. This led to the establishment of a church and a Jesuit Mission at Agra, which continued till 1803. Traveling with the royal retinue of Akbar during his expeditions, this European missionary had the occasion to see the vast unexplored Mughal Empire, which then spread from Kabul to east Bengal.

Akbar however did not seem to have shown any interest in the data collected by Monserrate, who kept it with himself when he returned from the mission. It is reasonably certain that a copy of Monserrate's manuscript journal was kept at the Jesuit college at Agra, from where it was taken by Tieffenthaler (see below), who may have passed it on to Francis Wilford in 1784 one year before his own death. It was made use of by the British when they reached the Mughal capital and formally deprived the titular emperor of his sovereignty. The European military might could have been of decisive use against the native kings only if the lay of the land was known to the foreigners. Accurate geographical information of the country came from the Jesuits.

The first reliable map of India by Albert D’Anville (1621-1662) was a great success because of his easy access to the meticulous field-work done by the Jesuits. The French who were the last of the Europeans to arrive in India and became semi-finalists in the power-game, acted as patrons to the French Jesuits working in the Carnatic Mission in south west India. Thanks to the Jesuits, the French were more successful on the scientific front than on the colonial. While the European traders had a good idea about India’s coast-line, says R. K. Kochhar, “they were ignorant about the country’s interior, having had no reason to venture there, nor being equipped for the task. Geographical exploration was left to the Jesuits, who had the training, the time, and the opportunity to cross-cross the country. They had also the necessary discipline to make careful observations, to record them faithfully, and to transmit them regularly.” In Europe, these reports were dutifully preserved, but not ignored and were used in later times.
There were other Jesuits in the Carnatic Mission, who attempted to discover and transfer the idea of India. The first dependable map of the interior of the southern peninsula was due to the efforts of Fr. Jean-Venant Bouchet (1655-1732) who had the distinction of arriving in India from the east rather than from the west. He covered the Coromandel Coast on foot, made astronomical observations at Pondicherry, and prepared maps and sketches from which D’Anville composed a new map.

In North India (Hindustan), there was another Jesuit who surveyed and reported on India: Fr. Claude Stanislaus Boudier (1686-1757). He traversed to North India at the invitation of the king of Jaipur, Sawai Jai Singh who had keen interest in astronomy and wanted the Jesuits to visit him for scientific consultations. The Jesuit Mission to Jaipur did not last, as the successors of Sawai Jai Singh were not interested in astronomy. His Memoir gives the description of places on the road between Agra and Bengal, with the computed distance of each from the course of river Gemne (Jamuna) and the Ganga. Boudier’s work was used extensively by Albert D’Anville and by his British counterpart, James Rennell.

The level of geographical knowledge rose to a large extent, after the arrival of the Jesuit astronomer and geographer Joseph Tieffenthaler (1710-1785), “well-known in the scientific circles of Europe....” He was well-trained in Mathematics, Astronomy, Geography and natural sciences and spoke German, Italian, Spanish and mastered French to be able to write several treatises in that language. His masterly works in Latin apart, he also wrote in Hindustani, Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit. He even composed a Sanskrit-Persian dictionary and wrote two treatises in Persian.

An energetic traveller, he knew no hurdles in traversing the length and breadth of Hindustan. A cursory look at his avid ramblings illustrates his passion for geographical study. And he kept a register of the latitudes of all the places he visited.

However, he has largely remained unknown, except in references of books, both in the world of geography and history. But for the only Anglo-Indian writer Frederic S. Growse who described him as one “who travelled extensively and wrote, in Latin, accounts of the country,” we would not have known Tieffenthaler in historical accounts. Of course, rich tributes are paid to him by the French traveller-orientalist Anquetil du Perron who introduced the learned missionary to the men of letters of Academic des Sciences of Paris. Another scientist who recognized him was John Bernoulli, an astronomer himself and member of the Royal Academy of Sciences of Berlin and of the Imperial Academy of St. Petersburg, who “found the works of Tieffenthaler so much up to the mark that he actually undertook to translate
and annotate several of them." In the words of Moonis Raza, "He was a keen observer of geographical phenomena, had the background to understand them and had the ability to express them lucidly. His descriptions are known for their accuracy and are based on an acute sensitivity to and perception of the Indian reality."  

6. Jesuit Explorers

The writings and notes of the Jesuits in expeditions belong to a separate category providing valuable information on the terrain, mountain routes, lands and peoples of the countries bordering India—Tibet, China, Nepal, Bhutan and so on. Interestingly there were over 25 Jesuits in expeditions during the 17th and 18th centuries, notable among whom were Bento de Goes (1562-1607), Francis de Azevedo (1578-1660), Antonio De Andrade (1580-1634), Johann Grueber (1623-1680), Albert D’Orville (1621-1662), and Ippolito Desideri (1684-1733). The ethnographical and geographical information they have left behind cannot be considered for our study here for want of space, but are available for a serious study. 

7. Jesuit Pundits in Indian Languages

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the Jesuits to India is their scholarship in some of the Indian languages. I shall briefly touch upon some Jesuits and their writings.

a) In Tamil

St. Francis Xavier, the first Jesuit to come to India and the first Provincial of the Jesuits in India insisted that all his subjects should learn very well the language of the place where they would work as missionaries. Fr. Enrique Henriquez (1520-1600) was the first Tamil scholar among the foreign missionaries. He composed 14 works in Tamil, including a grammar and a lexicon. Fr. Robert de Nobili (1577-1656) was the first European Sanskrit scholar. He could quote from Manu, from the Puranas and so on, which were generally known only to those Sanskrit scholars who could read Sanskrit manuscripts. De Nobili, known locally as Thathuva Pothakar (Learned Philosopher) was a scholar in Tamil also. He enriched Tamil with many words and phrases adapted from Sanskrit. His chief prose works are: Atma Nimayam (Science of the Soul), Gnana Upadesa Kandam (A kind of Summa Theologica) in four volumes and Dushana Dhikkaram (Refutation of Calumnies).
Other Tamil authors were Fr. Manuel Martins (1697-1756), the author of *Gnana Muthumalai* (The Spiritual Garland of Pearls); Fr. John Maynard (+ 1717) the author of *Nitya-Anitya Vithiyasam* (The difference between the Temporal and the Eternal); Fr. Antony de Proenza (+1660) the compiler of a great Tamil dictionary; Fr. Charles Bertoldi (+ 1740), the writer of *Gnana Mayurakshi* (Spiritual Exercises or a series of 24 retreat meditations; and Fr. James de Rossi (1701-1774) who has given us three volumes of *Lives of Saints* and seven volumes of *Pudumai* (Miracles).

Towering over all these writers stands Fr. Joseph Constantius Beschi (1680-1747), known locally as Viramamunivar (Great among Ascetics). Much has been written and much more deserves to be written about his master piece *Thembavani*, a religious poem in honour of St. Joseph. Other important works of Beschi are three Tamil grammars and three dictionaries: Tamil-Latin, Tamil-Portuguese and Tamil-Tamil. The Tamil-Tamil dictionary has proved a source of invaluable help to modern lexicographers.

b) In Malayalam

Fr. John Earnest Hanxleden (1689-1732), adept at Sanskrit literature, was known in Malabar as Arnos Padiri. He wrote in Latin a Sanskrit grammar on the lines of an original Sanskrit grammar work called Sidha-Rupam, and as a companion volume, he added a Sanskrit-Portuguese Dictionary. He was a great scholar in Malayalam (the language of Kerala) and composed a dictionary and a grammar in that language. His name is held in benediction among the Keralites chiefly for his *Puthenpana* (a Life of Christ in 10,000 couplets and Parvangal (Treatises on the four last things). Mention may be made of Mgr. Francis Ross, Archbishop of Cranganore (Kodungallur) in central Kerala, noted for his knowledge of Syriac, the liturgical language among the Syrian Christians of Kerala. He was well versed in Malayalam in which he composed many prayers.

c) In Telugu

Fr. Peter Lalane (1669-1748) was one of the few Jesuits who mastered Telugu (the language of Andhra region in south east India) so well as to be able to compile a good grammar and a lexicon in that language. Another Telugu scholar was Fr. Francis Ricci who not only taught that language in the school he had founded, but also wrote several text books for the use of the students. He also wrote a Telugu Catechism and a Refutation of the Puranic Cosmogony. Fr. Jean Calmette (1693-1739) who worked in the Telugu Country was well acquainted with the Vedas and forged from them weapons for meeting Hindus on their own grounds. Fr. Gaston
Coeurdoux (1691-1777) who worked round about Pondicherry was the first to discover the relationship of Sanskrit with Latin and Greek. To him belongs the credit of having anticipated some of the most important results of Comparative Philology by at least 50 years. On Fr. Jean Francois Pons (1698-1753) it is said that he gave a very accurate description of the various branches of Sanskrit literature, of the four Vedas, the grammatical treatises, the six systems of philosophy, and the astronomy of the Hindus.

**d) In Kanarese or Kannada**

Fr. Leonardo Cinnami (1609-1676) the founder of the Jesuit Mission of Mysore, was well versed in Kannada, the language of Karnataka region in south west India. He wrote several theological treatises in Kannada, several lives of saints, besides a dictionary and a grammar.

**e) In Konkani-Marathi**

Fr. Thomas Stephens (1689-1732), the first English man to come to India, is the author of the now well-known work called *Kristu Purana*, an epic poem of 11,000 stanzas dealing with the mysteries of Christianity. Besides this *magnum opus* he composed a Konkani Grammar and Catechism. Among other writers in Konkani, is Fr. Almeida who wrote a good number of religious stories and sermons in Konkani, and Fr. Maffei who wrote a *History of South Kanara*, a dictionary and a grammar in Konkani.

**f) In Syriac**

Archbishop Francis Roz (Ross) was learned in Syriac and taught that language in the Syrian Seminary conducted by the Jesuits. The Jesuits in Malabar translated from Latin into Syriac an exposition of the four Gospels, of the Pentateuch, the Lives of the Apostles and other saints, a book on sacraments, the Office of Our Lady, some parts of the Roman Missal, the Exorcism of St. Ambrose and a Ritual.

**g) In Persian, Arabic, Urdu and Hindustani**

Fr. Jerome Xavier (+ 1617), a nephew of the St. Francis Xavier and leader of the third mission sent to Akbar, remained more than 10 years in the Mogul court during which time he mastered Persian and wrote a dozen important works in that language. The corresponding English titles of those works are: *Life of Christ, The Mirror of Truth, Lives of the Apostles, The Psalter, The Gospels, The Guide of Kings,*
A History of the Martyrs and Saints, Life of Blessed Virgin Mary, Catechism, Prayer Book and a Persian Grammar.

There were other Jesuits in the Mughal Mission who wrote books in Arabic, Persian, Hindustani and Sanskrit. Notable among them was Fr. Henry Roth (1620-1668) who was a Sanskrit scholar and made the Western world acquainted with the Devanagari script by publishing an interesting account of it in the China Illustrated of Athanasius Kircher. His Sanskrit Grammar written for the Europeans is described as Opus Exactissimum (a most exact work). He also wrote an account of the ten Avatars.

8. Jesuit Educational Institutions and Libraries

Another channel of East-West exchange was the educational institutions managed by the Jesuits in India. It may be noted that by championing and pioneering the cause of western education in India, the Jesuits were mediating a change in the indigenous education system of India. What is noteworthy is the gradual replacement of the rote learning system of the Indian tradition with the analytical method of the Europeans. There are examples elsewhere too: in China, Mateo Ricci introduced the European system of learning. Commenting on the Jesuit contribution to science in India, Kochhar says, “Although the spread of the Christian faith was the most important plan of the Jesuits, their activities had a scientific dimension about them also, being the first European men of learning in India.” During the 231 years before the Suppression (1773), the Society of Jesus had been maintaining some 19 educational institutions in India. Though the Jesuits were teaching a vast array of subjects such as Mathematics, Geography, History and other natural sciences, besides European languages, they were not able to, or rather, they were constrained by certain obscurantist ideologies held by the Church in the 18th century, due to which they could not bring to India, the best of the European advancements in science.

Attached to all the important Jesuit colleges were the Jesuit libraries, especially in the colleges of St. Paul’s at Goa, Cochin and Bassein. However, these were destroyed and their precious volumes confiscated by the Portuguese and Dutch Governments and by the Mahrattas respectively in the late 18th century. The Jesuits in the Carnatic Mission also had an Oriental Library where they had preserved several manuscripts of the Hindu Religious books such as the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, etc.
9. The Pioneer Jesuit Presses in India

Another significant medium of East-West interaction was the printing press, which was considered a secondary tool for evangelization to disseminate Christian message to the natives. Jesuits were the first to introduce into India the western method of printing with movable types. In 1556 the first printing press with movable types of Roman script was set up in the Jesuit College of St. Paul’s in Goa. Within a few years two more presses were established, one for Malabar—the Syriac press in Cochin, and another Tamil press in Ponnaikayal.

10. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it can be said that the Jesuit-mediated East-West interaction in India was substantial in both quantity and quality especially in transferring European sciences to India, which effected modernization of many Indian languages. Compilation of bilingual dictionaries apart, very often the first grammar books in many Indian languages were composed by the missionaries. The Jesuit missionaries, who had their own agenda of evangelization, were significant channels for this transaction although many of them were oblivious of the colonial agenda of their patrons and benefactors.

That aside, the Europeans who elicited interest in India had varied agenda. On the one hand, the colonizers and administers tended to see knowledge about the East as a means to acquire power over the East. Thus by mapping and discovering the Indian lands, hills, rivers, forts, people and so on, there has been a strengthening of colonial power and appropriation of knowledge and control over the Indians. On the other hand, the intellectuals and the enlightened public in Europe seem to have had widened their scope of interests: from commerce and trade to having Oriental literature, philosophy and wisdom. Indeed Orientalism which reached a climax during the 19th and 20th centuries under British colonialism in India had its beginning with the Jesuit orientalists of the earlier periods.

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Footnotes and References


3 Vasco da Gama’s arrival at Calicut on the Kerala coast in 1498 is generally considered the beginning of colonialism in the Indian sub-continent. Though the Afghans, Persians and Arabs had marched into India with their armies and ruled India earlier, their rule is not considered colonial because they settled here.

4 Though it is generally believed that the Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive in India, scholars have acknowledged that the first Europeans to arrive in India were Italian Franciscan missionaries, who arrived at Quilon (Kollam, in local parlance) on the Kerala coast in early thirteenth century. In fact, the Franciscans built up a European mission in this distant land which eventually became the first Latin diocese in Asia, headquartered at Quilon in 1329.


6 Portugal had proposed that 1998 (the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Vasco da Gama in India) be declared the UN Year of the Oceans. Central to the beginning of colonialism was control over the seas. So celebrating it as
the UN Year of the Oceans would have provided legitimacy to colonialism. Hence, the proposal met with opposition from several countries.

7 A system of state patronage of the Portuguese colonial government for evangelization in colonized regions.

8 Racial prejudice against Asians also came in the way of recruiting them into the Jesuit Society. Only two Asians (one Japanese and an Indian) were admitted into the Society its Suppression in 1773.

9 Inquisition was an instrument of the Ecclesiastical authorities to keep a check on the religious practice of the converts, using sanctions on those who did not toe the line. The Padroado-managed Church authorities met with opposition from Indian Christians, especially in Malabar, due to this. On Inquisition, see Anant Kakha Prisklar, *The Goa Inquisition*, 1961.


12 Kate Telscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India*, 1600-1800, 1995.

13 For a typical study on the Hindus from European eyes, see Abbe Dubois, *Hindoos Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, reprint 1982: it seems Dubois had made use of Jesuit sources for this book.

14 For instance, Joseph Tiefenthaler concludes thus in his preface: “Should the reader find in this description anything praiseworthy, let him refer it to the honour and glory of the most High; and let him pray that He may let shine the light of truth on the nations which err in the darkness of superstition and idolatry”. See Severin Noti, “A Forgotten Geographer of India,” p. 26.

15 On Monserrat’s work, Hoyland, J. S., (ed & tr.), *The Commentary of Father Monserrate, S. J. on his Journey to the Court of Akbar*, reprint 1992


17 During the 231 years (1542-1773) before the Suppression, nearly 1700 Jesuits belonging to 15 European nationalities came to work in the Indian Mission, the first Mission of the Jesuit Society, which originally included areas from East Africa to Japan.


23 In 1804 Francis Wilford of the Bengal Engineers brought out a valuable *Map of the Countries West of Delhi*. This map was a tremendous improvement on any thing that had been produced before. For the collection of the material, he employed a surveyor, Mirza Mogul Beg between 1786 and 1796, and made use of Fr. Monserrate’s manuscript.


25 The colonial geographers avidly scanned the 34 Jesuit volumes of *Letters Edifiante et Curiose*. Interestingly, an abridged translation in two volumes was edited in London in 1743 by John Lockman entitled, *Travels of the Jesuits into Various Parts of the world*.


29 E. Maclagan, op. cit., p. 15. See also R. K. Kochhar, ibid., p 177

30 He was among the 14 member expedition team sent to Siam (Thailand) in 1687 by King Louis XIV designated as “The Mathematicians of the King.” Expelled from Siam, Fr. Bouchet and Fr. Jean Richard reached India. See R. K. Kochhar, “French Astronomers in India during the 17th – 19th Centuries,” in *Journal of British Astronomical Association* (hereinafter, *French Astronomers*), 1991, pp. 95, 101

31 Kochhar, *Secondary Tools*, p 179


See Frederic S. Growse, India District Gazetteers, North Western Memoirs, States Reports, Mathura: A District Memoir, etc., 1880.

Severin Noti, op. cit., p.2: See also the German original work (in Vidyajyoti library) titled, Joseph Tieffenhale, Historich-geographische Beschreibung von Hindustan (Ed) Herg pub Von Johan Bernoulli, Berlin, 1785, pp. 370 with 33 illustrations.


For a brief study on the Jesuit explorers, see Sandberg, G. (ed), op. cit.


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