

Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (1683-1719)

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Serving Christ in India

Part One: God's Preparations for Ziegenbalg's Future Calling

One often reads in popular works and even in doctoral theses that Englishman William Carey founded the first Protestant Mission in the non-English speaking world on behalf of the Particular Baptist Missionary Society.

Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg and William Carey

Actually, the Baptists were rather late in discovering the world-wide mission field as Lutherans, Church of England and Independent missionary enterprises beat the Baptists by over a century. Great as Carey's work was, it was built on the pioneering work of Christians of other denominations, in particular that of Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg who was called to India almost a century before Carey. The missionary work Carey undertook in Danish held territory reflected and built on Ziegenbalg's endeavours and successes which were carried on by Ziegenbalg's son in Serampore long after Ziegenbalg's death. Indeed, the Danish influence on Carey started before he sailed to India in the Danish vessel Kron Prinsessa Maria to Calcutta. As the British East India Company forbade Carey to evangelise the territories they claimed to rule, he and his co-workers Marshman and Ward settled in the Danish colony of Serampore in 1805 where the evangelical traditions of Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg were still honoured and followed. Ziegenbalg's only surviving son Gottlieb Ernst Ziegenbalg became the first Director of the Danish East India Company in Serampore in the 1750s and brought with him missionaries from Tranquebar to preach regularly in the colony. The colony thus welcomed Carey, Marshman and Ward with open arms as being of one mind and calling with them.

It was with the enthusiastic encouragement of the Danish King Frederick VI and the Danish Governor Colonel Bie that the 'Serampore Trio' established the Serampore College in 1818, on the pattern of the first protestant theological seminary founded in 1716 at Tranquebar. This venture was aided by a gift of 5,000 dollars and gold medals to each member of staff from King Frederick. The college was soon to be given a charter as Denmark's third University after Copenhagen (1479) and Kiel (1665) by the Danish monarch and was then able to award academic degrees. It must be also noted that the newly founded Particular Baptist Missionary Society did not approve of the Baptists' move in allying with

the Lutherans and later Church of England Christians as I have shown in previous New Focus articles. Indeed, the alleged part played by the Particular Baptist Missionary Society in their support for the Serampore Mission must be re-structured due to a bevy of new studies challenging their 'traditional' accounts.

Discovering Tharangambadi

Finding Tharangambadi, or Tranquebar, on the map is not at all difficult. If one moves the eye from the sharp point of northern Sri Lanka across the Bay of Bengal going due north, there on the coastline you will find Tharangambadi. Actually getting there is quite a different matter. The small town of 23,000 inhabitants with its one eight-roomed hotel and one restaurant has no railway and the various 'local' airports are all three to four taxi-hours away. Getting there by a small boat is perhaps easier but the coastland is susceptible to many storms. Perhaps this is why the town is called Tharangambadi which means 'Singing Waves' though the waves often howl. Tharangambadi is the modern name for Tranquebar, given to the town by its Danish occupiers in 1620 after allegedly buying it from the Raja of Thanjavur.

Once in the town, however, one finds it is beautifully situated. Though recent storms have removed a long piece of the coast line, this destruction is now hardly noticeable as Tharangambadi is being polished up and even becoming a tourist attraction, and the old centre, built by the Danes, has been renovated and many over 300 years old buildings have been restored. This includes several buildings centring round the main character of my story, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg who arrived in Tranquebar in 1705/6 and in a very few years transformed the place.

Tharangambadi's testimony to Ziegenbalg's work

When one walks down the Tharangambadi High Street, one cannot miss seeing an enormous statue at the end of the road. There are lots of similar statues all over India, often painted gold to make them appear more impressive, and they are usually set up in remembrance of great statesmen, military heroes, or local Rajahs. This statue is, however, quite different. It is set up to commemorate the first German missionary to India, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, sent by courtesy of the Danish King over 300 years ago to found the Tranquebar Mission. Behind the statue there are two large though unusual plaques for this mostly conservative Hindu town which surprisingly commemorate a foreign Christian missionary. However, the inhabitants of Tharangambadi are too grateful to forget the great impact young Ziegenbalg's work had in placing the town firmly on the map and in the Indian history books and Tamil lexica. Indeed the Indian historian and theologian David Jeyaraj has called Ziegenbalg 'The Father of Modern Protestant Missions' and 'The Morning Star of India. Thus, as soon as one reaches Tranquebar from the sea, one finds on the promenade a large stone edifice commemorating the landing of the good ship *Princessa Sophia Hedwiga*

which brought Ziegenbalg to the town. Should you have sent postcards off to Europe from Tharangambadi in recent years, they will have been sent from the Post Office with stamps bearing a portrait of Ziegenbalg produced during a week of official celebrations in Ziegenbalg's honour.

Ziegenbalg's 'firsts'

The plaques on the High Street bear the admonition in capital letters 'BE ALWAYS THE FIRST', followed by the words, 'ZIEGENBALG WAS'. Next, there is a list of 'firsts' attributed to Ziegenbalg numbered from one to twenty-four engraved like the two tablets of Moses. His work for the gospel is listed as a 'first' but also his 'practical divinity' in founding schools for both girls and boys, establishing a Seminary to train Christian leaders; promoting home crafts; building an orphanage; setting up factories; engaging in strenuous social work including establishing a 'free meals' kitchen for the poor, widows and ex-slaves; founding the town's tailoring trade; building and running a paper mill; creating an alphabet for the local language, translating the Bible; teaching the printing trade; authoring books in Tamil and even translating Tamil works into German dealing with the religious history of the area. Indeed Ziegenbalg seemed to have had his finger in every pie, pulling out all the plums in order to nourish the hundreds whom he suddenly found under his care both spiritually and bodily. Furthermore, Ziegenbalg is credited with founding the first Christian congregation in all Asia since the days of the early Church and helping his congregation to build a church through their own energies and work. This church building is still standing and in regular use as also the Manse built for Ziegenbalg though the latter has recently been opened as a cultural museum. Ziegenbalg's grave is also still standing in the church cemetery, looking as if it had been newly erected. The local Hindus confess that Ziegenbalg even influenced their own religion which adopted the idea of grace from Ziegenbalg not present in Hinduism before. Indeed, all over old Tranquebar one is reminded of Ziegenbalg by the New Jerusalem church, public buildings, schools and machinery he set up, all kept in good condition by a thankful community and modern travel brochures boast in a positive sense that because of this, time has stood still in Tharangambadi. Time might have stood still but Ziegenbalg's gospel is still continuing there though when the British 'bought' Tharangambadi from the Danes in 1845 they stopped the Danish-German missionary witness. More than one commentator I have read remarks that time has not really stood still in Tharangambadi because Ziegenbalg's ideas are still ultra-modern.

The birth and upbringing of a missionary

Ziegenbalg was born on the 24th of June, 1683 in humble circumstances but his Christian mother died when he was a small child. His strongest memory of his mother was when she confessed on her death bed that she was leaving a great treasure behind. The tiny tot misunderstood her words and asked where the treasure was buried. His mother smiled and with her

last breath raised her hand and indicated that her oldest daughter and her young son were her treasures in the Lord and with this happy smile still on her face, the good woman died. Ziegenbalg did not have such happy memories of his father who married another woman a few months after his wife's death and estranged the children. He died soon after whilst Ziegenbalg was only six and left his oldest daughter Anna who had a strong trust in the Lord but was married to a very stern husband, to look after Bartholomäus and his younger sister, both of whom were in very poor health.

Ziegenbalg's sister sent her brother to a primary school in Kamenz and then to the Grammar School at Görlitz where he seemed, at first, to be more interested in music than anything else and joined a band of the Grammar School's musicians who called themselves the 'Collegium musicum'. One day, however, as they were playing some old folksongs, there was a knock at the door and a young man, scarcely out of his teens himself, asked if he could come in. Once he had been given a seat he explained that he was an itinerant preacher and wished to tell them that though it is a fine thing to play and sing songs praising the beautiful countryside as they did, music was much more designed for praising the Lord who on such a fine summer's day has made all things bright and beautiful. Most of the musicians mocked the well-meant words of the preacher and the 'collegium' was quickly abandoned. Ziegenbalg, however, hung on to the young man's words and was to hear him often over the next six months witnessing to the need to be born again in Christ and follow the path of the gospel. Though Ziegenbalg had neglected his studies somewhat when playing in the pupils' band, which he now left, he neglected his school work almost altogether by accompanying Johannes the rather mystical preacher, who was a follower of Jacob Böhme, on his various journeys believing that his 'guiding star' was leading him to have peace with God. As soon as Johannes moved out of the district Ziegenbalg felt as if he had been left in the dark with his only light and hope gone.

A mother's care for her son lasts longer than her life

Since he was a small child, Ziegenbalg had been convinced he would one day study for the Christian ministry but now he found himself most unworthy to take on such a task. During one night of torment, Ziegenbalg forgot the mystical preacher who had become his idol and his thoughts returned to his mother whose last words were of the treasure she had left. He now realised his mother had always found her treasures in the Word of God and left his bed, lit a candle and took out his mother's old Bible and turned to the text his mother had so often read for her children. It was Psalm 23. From that night on, Ziegenbalg became a man of the Bible, putting aside all the mystical paraphernalia of Hyper-Pietism which had offered him the two props of the Bible and their mystical dreams on which to build his faith. The one prop of God's word was enough as it showed him the one salvation in Jesus Christ which he now had found, like his mother and elder sister. He then took up his studies again with great

eagerness and earned not only good marks but the praise of his teachers.

Missing a father's hand

Ziegenbalg, happy in his memories of his mother, felt the absence of a guiding fatherly hand badly and he longed for an earthly father with the faith of his mother. One of his teachers gave him the advice to seek out Professor August Hermann Franke at Halle who had devoted his life to being a father to the fatherless. Ziegenbalg knew of Franke's work amongst orphans and decided to write to him seeking guidance. Franke replied swiftly, encouraging him to keep up his former ideas of entering the ministry and advised him to deepen and complete his Grammar School learning by joining Joachim Lange's famous Friedrich-Werderschen Grammar School in Berlin for the final instruction he needed before studying theology. Professor Franke arranged everything for Ziegenbalg who was still unsure of his suitability for the ministry. Lange had been a penniless student under Franke in Leipzig and was to become Professor of Biblical Exegesis in Halle where Franke had long wished to have him. Lange is better known in England through his hymns, a number of which appear in the hymn-books of English speaking countries. Lange, together with his friend Philipp Jakob Spener took Ziegenbalg under their wings and the young scholar studied Spener's *Pia Desideria* to his spiritual edification. A number of scholars believe that Spener was influenced in this work by Scotland's John Durie, known to readers of this magazine. Ziegenbalg soon showed his maturity in the faith as well as academic abilities and soon found himself, despite ill-health at Halle under the guidance of Franke. However, Ziegenbalg had spent a couple of weeks at the Leipzig, Wittenberg and Jena universities before opting for Halle which he found to be a veritable heaven on earth.

Ziegenbalg's mistrusts his own abilities

This peace was somewhat disturbed by a letter from his elder sister Anna telling him that he had inherited the family's farm and was needed back home. His health broke down again and he had to return home, not to take over the farm but to recuperate under Anna's care before returning to Halle feeling much stronger in body and spirit. His bags were all packed and he was ready to depart but two events hindered his return. The first was that a friend, faced with an eight-week absence from his church and school begged Ziegenbalg to take over both tasks for him until his return. Ziegenbalg felt duty-bound to help and reaped great blessings in the work. On his friend's return with a lady on his arm whom he swiftly married with Ziegenbalg being an honoured wedding guest, Ziegenbalg packed his bags again for Halle but suddenly School Director Lange sent him a message to say that he had an earnest proposal to set before him prompted by a letter from Professor Franke.

The interview with his friend and former teacher was to alter Ziegenbalg's life completely. Lange greeted Ziegenbalg with the news that the King of

Denmark, Frederich IV, was looking for missionaries gifted in preaching and teaching to pioneer a church and school founding work in Tranquebar. He had found none in Denmark equal to the task and through his court chaplain had turned to Professor Franke for help. After deep consultation and prayer between Lange, Spener, and Franke, it was decided that Ziegenbalg and his friend, brother and fellow-student Heinrich Plütschau were ideally gifted to represent the Danish missionary outreach in India. Ziegenbalg could scarcely understand what he was hearing and all his thoughts were confused so he asked for a time to organize his mind and heart. After a few days, he wrote a letter to his advisors claiming that on grounds of unsuitability he must reject the proposal. Professor Franke and his brethren took this merely as a sign of humility and re-emphasised their conviction that he was the right man for the task. Ziegenbalg then visited his friend Plütschau to discuss the matter and found him convinced that as it was the Lord's will that they should go into all the world and preach the gospel, as Ziegenbalg had so often stressed, so why not start with India? Together in prayer, all doubts and difficulties disappeared from the two friends' minds and they both felt a strong call that they should follow Christ in His work in Tranquebar.

A ship was ready to set off to India and the next opportunity might take months or more so the two friends had no time to say farewell to their families. The King had sent both men one hundred dollars each to cover their costs. They had even to leave their libraries and much of their personal possessions behind them and travelled lightly on the post coach to the harbour. Ziegenbalg was happy he had at least his mother's Bible in his luggage. His last words to Plütschau before boarding the coach were, 'I am convinced that it is God's will to send us to the heathen but will I be fit for the task?' Then they travelled through Mecklenburg towards Rostock where the ship was at anchor.

Difficulties not envisaged

From Rostock they sailed to Denmark where they were received in Copenhagen by the court chaplain Dr Lütkens who was born in Germany. As the two men had not been ordained, they were sent off to the Bishop of Seeland, Dr. Bornemann for the ceremony. To their surprise, the good bishop refused to ordain them without a strict examination in Latin starting with the question 'Quid est regeneratio', or 'what is the New Birth?' Ziegenbalg replied quickly in Latin that the New Birth is an act of grace which transfers a person into life'. Further questions ensued concerning the state of the wicked outside of Christ and what is the content of the gospel to be preached to them. He was not pleased to find that the candidates looked on all people as sinners and did not distinguish between 'heathen Christian' and those of 'Christian' countries. Both men answered as born again Bible-believing Christians but the Bishop was obviously not pleased with the answers and refused to ordain Ziegenbalg and Plütschau. When the King was told of this rejection, he gathered from Dr. Lütkens that the questions had been adequately and correctly answered and that, as Dr

Lütkens said, the Bishop was a 'hot head' and so he demanded a new examination to take place within three days in the presence of his court chaplain otherwise another bishop could easily be found. The Bishop said he was surprised how the two candidates had changed their opinions, on being questioned, which was quite untrue but they were promptly ordained.

Free to go abroad

Their first given task as ordained men was to preach before the King and his family on Acts 26:16-18 concerning Paul's conversion and commission:

I will appear unto thee; Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.

After this, the Danish Christian brethren fitted Ziegenbalg and Plütschau out for the journey and made sure they had sufficient money to finance at least the start of their ministry. On 30 November the two missionaries boarded the *Princessa Sophia Hedwiga* and started on their dangerous sea-voyage to Calcutta (Kolkata) which was to last until June of the following year. There was danger enough on the journey as the ship lost its masts in wild storms but there was a greater danger ahead. The Danish East India Company were shocked to hear that the Danish Christians had sent out missionaries to India. 'They will raise up the natives to challenge our authority,' they argued in rage. So the DEIC rapidly sent off a faster ship to India to inform the Governor of Tranquebar that he must do all in his power to stop the missionaries landing and gaining access to the inhabitants. They obviously believed as confessing Christians that the gospel of liberty must, at all costs, not be preached to the 'heathen'.

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