

JESUITS AS INTERNATIONAL CULTURE BROKERS

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The Jesuits, refined scholars and polymaths with the arts and science traditions of the best in Europe, surged, from the inception of their Society in 1540, as pioneering agents of transfer of knowledge and cultures between the West and East. The Society of Jesus' founders were determined to create an international, cosmopolitan group of men that could move beyond national frontiers and concerns, resulting obviously in globalization of knowledge when these men began embracing the whole world¹. Texts and contexts about India circulated globally via Jesuits and these were presented to thousands of students too in their many colleges in Europe and India.

The Society of Jesus made learning central in its constitutions and used knowledge to reach the elite and conquer them spiritually. Through systematic argumentation the Jesuits thought that they could impress upon the Brahmins the truth of Christianity and the falsity of other religions; they also thought that Indians could be converted by means of music and impressive religious services; whereas in China and Japan the Jesuits took to astronomy and mathematics since there these sciences mattered a lot.

Jesuit vast scholarly oeuvres depicting the Indian context led Europe to a better understanding of itself and of India. Dramas reflecting the Indian situation were written for European stages based on

¹ In the XVI century (1542-1580) half of the Jesuits in India were Portuguese, and two thirds of the remainder were Spaniards and the rest from different nationalities Germans and Italians, French. At its zenith in 1627-1666, there were 538 Jesuits in India. Gonçalves, 2000, p. 54.

information sent to Europe. Oriental contexts, themes and characters were offered to European audience to show the heroic feats of the missionaries in India. Literary (books, correspondence, annual letters) and artistic (painting, music, drama, architecture) production by the Jesuits or by others under their direction, and the intercontinental exchange of this production is phenomenal. The pioneering works of Jesuits as explorers, diplomats, administrators, government advisors, technicians continue to attract the scholars' attention.

Jesuits as global travellers, but not always with global culture, were the first European men of learning in India². The diversity of Jesuit thought was only natural, for these men had spread rapidly to many countries³. The significance of Jesuit information lies in the fact that it is greatly based on observation. Jesuits had the training, time and opportunities and many others used the field-work information gathered by them.

The position that reduces Jesuit activities to conversions or salvation of souls is incorrect. Jesuits adopted local costumes and used the technical and scientific knowledge learnt in European universities as starting points to gain acceptance from the local authorities and population⁴. Jesuits were not only evangelisers but also scientists, astronomers, writers, artists, path-breakers. It is not possible to separate cultural and scientific work from evangelisation. Theirs was a humanistic approach, addressing human progress as they understood it. Jesuits had the conditions and infrastructure that made possible life of scholarship and motivation to shape the world through learning and teaching. Jesuit experiments in the field of learning assisted by their freedom for engagement with the world and a desire to save souls, shaped Jesuit identity. Jesuit intellectual trademark came from the colleges and universities they owned⁵. They came across as entrepreneurs of the souls and impresarios of learning and knowledge⁶.

Ignatius wanted the Society of Jesus to be free from everything that could impede extensive mobility of Jesuits for creative action in the field. But the Jesuits did not always sustain its founder's risk-taking attitude and innovation. Over-centralisation and the Society's

² Souza, 1993, p. 176.

³ Grafton, 2009, p. 161.

⁴ Gonçalves, 2000, p. 8.

⁵ Grafton, 2009, p. 168.

⁶ Grafton, 2009, p. 160.

demand for conformity to norms, would soon begin to stifle creative approaches. A standard format for writing information was introduced and Jesuit material destined for publication began to be carefully scrutinized for censorship, taking the shape of edifying narratives of activities devoid of spontaneity and creativity⁷.

But were the Jesuit in India —they were all Europeans without exception and many Iberians— culturally prepared to learn anything from non-Christian cultures? The Jesuits had a Eurocentric philosophical and theological formation, with sensibilities moulded in European post-renaissance mentality, hence not easily adaptable to oriental cultures, which cultures they considered as impregnated by pagan spirit and whose peoples were of slow learning nature. The Jesuit cultural march in no period of its history ever matched their transcontinental journey, since conversions, not culture, was their main objective.

Despite serious limitations, the pedagogical and international character of the Society of Jesus facilitated intercontinental transfer and circulation of knowledge, but the knowledge exported from India to West by the Jesuits still needs acknowledgement. But it is certain that scholarly works produced in India narrating social and cultural experiments and the local contexts was received avidly in Europe. Culture investments helped to open the doors for the work of conversion and also to reduce social conflicts and to accept cultural relativism. Jesuit knowledge besides providing information for better management and decision making, it also assisted in shaping the Society of Jesus' identity.

TRANSFER OF LOCAL CONTEXT

Undeniably, the main objective of the missionaries was evangelization, but they needed to understand the context, the social structures, customs, languages, which was essential to achieve optimum results and avert opposition. Moreover, the missionaries had to convey home information about context where they worked to help their superiors, often miles away, to understand them and their activities and to choose the right candidates for missionary work. Only the European eagerness to receive information from India motivated the missionaries to write many letters.

⁷ Kawamura, 2009, p. 202.

Jesuits entered unknown societies and had to walk a fine line of accommodation like in South India not to alienate or provoke one or the other local group. They adopted some creative missionary methods, which their religious superiors reluctantly tolerated at times, as for example the adaptation experiments initiated by Robert de Nobili.

In the middle of the sixteenth century, Indian society and customs were already better known in Europe than those of many other places; however, India continued to fascinate and draw the curiosity of adventurers and Jesuits alike⁸.

Unknown spaces offered missionaries opportunities for civilizing its population and for acts of heroism.

TRANSFER OF TEXTS

Description of contexts went along with the study of local languages. Jesuits taught literature, grammar, local languages in their educational institutions⁹. Some of them devoted much time to study local languages and produced several original literary texts¹⁰.

The literary genres cultivated by Jesuits were decided by the daily spiritual needs of the new converts and evangelization concerns. Jesuits wrote the first vocabularies, grammars, catechism books and sermons in local languages. They used the printing press, which they brought to India in 1556, as a tool in the world of texts. These men believed in mass conversion, hence in mass production of texts.

Jesuits gave the world large information about religions practised in India like Hinduism, its sacred literature and Islam. Local literature and other texts were sent to Europe, some original some translations, to also help prepare future missionary recruits for India. Works written by Jesuits in local languages have been translated into several European languages¹¹. Jesuit linguistic contribution to Indian lan-

⁸ Wessels, 1924, p. VI.

⁹ Kawamura, 2009, p. 316.

¹⁰ Some Jesuit pioneers in the field of Indian literature are: Robert de Nobili (1577-1656) contribution to the study of Sanskrit and Tamil; Constant Beschi, Tamil Scholar Beschi's *Thembavani*; Thomas Stephen Konkani and Marathi. Heinrich Roth (1620-1668) wrote a Sanskrit grammar which is the first European (Latin) Sanskrit grammar; John Ernest Hanxleeden, a scholar in Sanskrit and Malayalam (Kawamura, 2009, p. 186).

¹¹ Souza, 1992, p. 205.

guages such as grammars and lexicography is quite remarkable; the contribution in the realm of local creative literature is rather limited, although they have produced a considerable amount of writings of a religious, scriptural, liturgical and hagiographical nature¹².

Those pioneering works helped to enlarge the scope of social, cultural and linguistic disciplines in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The missionaries informed Europe about the Indian linguistic field. Evidence shows that Jesuit missionaries introduced Sanskrit and Panini (ancient Sanskrit grammarian), Indo-Arian and Dravidian languages to Europe¹³; they contributed to comparative linguistics and lexicography and were responsible for showing that Konkani (local language of Konkan Coast in India) and Marathi (of Maharashtra state) languages have an affinity with Latin and Greek long before Sir William Jones did¹⁴. In many cases Latin script for native languages was a missionary invention.

In the case of Goa, Jesuits were the first to write down in Konkani, a dominant language there. They composed grammars and dictionaries, religious literature, (catechism books, lives of saints, sermons, meditations) in that language; they were responsible for giving a literary body to it¹⁵. Local religious literature had a dual purpose: firstly, to deepen the faith of the converts and secondly, to teach them how to read and write.

The Society of Jesus stressed that Jesuits study languages of the region¹⁶ and recognized that knowledge of the local languages was indispensable for missionary work¹⁷. But again, how many Jesuits took that seriously! On perceiving that Jesuits showed scant interest in learning local languages, Alexander Valignano, an eminent Jesuit superior and administrator in the East in the sixteenth century, decided to formulate a language policy for missions¹⁸. Gradually more

¹² Souza, 1992, p. 199.

¹³ Souza, 1992, p. 202.

¹⁴ Kawamura, 2009, p. 320. Thomas Stephens wrote a letter to his brother in 1583 stating that the structures of languages spoken in Goa are similar to those of Greek and Latin; Kawamura, 2009, p. 320. Thomas Stephens anticipated by two hundred years what William Jones would state in 1786; Kawamura, 2009, p. 330.

¹⁵ Kawamura, 2009, p. 321.

¹⁶ Souza, 1992, p. 198.

¹⁷ Souza, 1992, p. 197.

¹⁸ Souza, 1992, p. 198.

missionaries took to the study of local languages¹⁹. They established several schools and colleges where they also taught local languages, but unfortunately the natives did not produce literary texts.

TRANSFER OF ART

Goa represents to a large extent Jesuit creative experiments in art and architecture that unrivalled any place in the world. Goan craftsmen—under the direction of Jesuits—produced exquisite works of art such as in silver and gold, precious metals, ivory and wood, carvings and paintings, furniture and fabrics for divine cult in Jesuit churches²⁰. The message transmitted through words received reinforcement from visuals.

From the sixteenth century Indian artistic elements, be they decorative elements or motifs or oriental traits and themes, merged with Christian art and iconography, then a new art emerged that came to be known in the nineteenth century as Indo-Portuguese art. This kind of art played an important role in the work of evangelization and the Jesuits propagated this kind of art. They took Goan craftsmen to Brazil for instance, who in turn created further cultural and artistic synthesis. Jesuits linked classical knowledge and literature to local art and theatre.

TRANSCONTINENTAL TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE

From the establishment of the Society of Jesus in 1540, the Jesuits left behind detailed records of their encounters with indigenous cultures and inhabitants, records that reveal the complexity of those exchanges and diversity of the ‘modus operandi’ of the Jesuits. Those records also provided the social and cultural contexts that existed before the arrival of colonial powers.

From the missionary accounts and information on India the Europeans learnt a great deal about peoples living in the East²¹. Although Jesuit reporting was relatively objective, offering glimpses of what took place in different parts of the world, they were bound to

¹⁹ Kawamura, 2009, p. 319.

²⁰ Gonçalves, 2000, p. 367.

²¹ Europe had learnt about Asia from the Roman times, the Franciscan friars who brought the ancient records to life in the XIII and XIV centuries and from Marco Polo writings.

write what could edify the audience rather than what is considered objective information. The format prescribed for Jesuit reporting did away with spontaneity and censoring of information meant for publication was exercised rigorously; but writings not meant for publication contained more spontaneous and honest information²².

Jesuit travellers, keen observers and scholars, saw men and things unseen by any Europeans before. They added fresh data to geographical science, climate, peoples and ethnographical studies; they kept elaborate diaries or journals where they noted accurately distances, roads, and their conditions, places and countries, and such data collection lent great credibility to Jesuit reporting; these men recorded their experiences but many of their findings remained hidden for long in dusty archives²³; and from the accounts of the Jesuits, Europeans gained a new image of India. These Jesuits although not equipped with methods in social sciences, they surged as pioneers; although with little experience or no maps at all, they added original data and expanded human knowledge. But their ultimate goal was to save souls, not to impart knowledge.

As the Jesuits traversed the globe to save souls, they also became culture brokers and ambassador for both the indigenous and European parties. It is common knowledge that Jesuits have promoted intercontinental cultural exchanges. Examples of this cultural and artistic exchange have been documented in depth²⁴. But despite this acknowledgement, one wonders whether admiration for indigenous cultures was rare among the missionaries. Jesuit insensitivity towards other religions and cultures has already met with stiff critique. No matter how praiseworthy some Jesuit achievements in cultural exchange might be, it is a fact that cultural dialogue could in any way be described as Ignatian or as a trait in the Jesuit repertoire²⁵.

The cultural and literary contribution by the Jesuits²⁶ in India is unparalleled in scale, intensity and originality in missionary history. The Jesuits were the only group of men that embraced the whole

²² Kawamura, 2009, p. 200.

²³ Wessels, 1924, p. VI.

²⁴ Kawamura, 2009.

²⁵ Kawamura, 2009, p. 200.

²⁶ Read Europeans: Portuguese, Italians, Spanish, Germans, Flemish, Polish. Indians were not admitted into the Society until the middle of XIX century.

earth and wrote extensively on diverse issues from wherever they travelled; secondly, several new cultural trends in astronomy, art, medicine, music, natural sciences, philosophy arrived in 'non-Christian' regions via the Jesuit enterprise; thirdly, the vast transfer of knowledge helped Europeans to construct a new self-identity.

Dialogue and collision between world religions and Christendom, conflicts between local cultures and European sovereignties, consensus and disagreements among the Jesuit themselves, place the Jesuits at the crossroads of cultural encounters. Concepts like 'encounter', 'hybridity', 'assimilation', 'integration', etc. are being increasingly used where there was none then, and also to describe the Jesuit transcontinental journey, but it is a fact that the Jesuit global enterprise in no period of history ever matched their cultural march.

Priests, and more so the Jesuits, learnt rhetoric as a tool for preaching and convincing the other; they employed logic or argumentation to defeat their opponent. Stress on public speaking and preaching in priest formation led to under-valuing the importance of listening to the viewpoints of others, particularly of those from non-European contexts and from the opponents. The seminarians have hardly been taught to listen creatively. The Jesuit pre-constructed thesis and formulas blinded them to other truths and viewpoints. Arguably, this was just normal then, but it turned out to be one of the major failures in formation of religious men until as late as the middle of the twentieth century, although in 1919 the encyclical 'Maximum Illud', announced by Pope Benedict XV, had already strongly urged the establishment of a strong local Catholic Church, ordination of native priests and respect for local cultures.

Jesuit history of planting of Christendom in varied contexts, at times appearing as an impossible mission, other times blundered by the Jesuits themselves, could nevertheless provide footprints today in the direction of the much desired inter-cultural and transnational exchanges.

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