

Gujarat Jesuits Pioneer in Print Media **Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ**

It would be no exaggeration, I believe, to state that the pioneers in the print media in Gujarat have been the Jesuits. Protestant missionaries, of course, had been active in Gujarat much before the Catholics, and they had even set up the first printing press in Surat in 1820 and started publishing biblical and educational literature in Gujarati. But Surat then belonged to the Bombay Presidency.

The first Jesuit priest Fr. Augustine Martin, SJ came to Gujarat on Dec.16, 1894 as a missionary to work among the local people. But the first trail blazer Catholic Missionary was Fr. Manuel Gomes of Bombay archdiocese. He reached Gujarat in 1893 and in the same year he baptized 18 candidates from Mogari, a village near Anand and received them into Catholic faith.

The first Jesuit missionary Fr. Augustine Martin after studying Gujarati for one full year took up residence at Anand, the cradle of Church in Gujarat and also started simultaneously Vadtal mission. Soon many other Jesuits followed him in the course of time.

From the beginning of Jesuit missionary apostolate in Gujarat, one of their priorities was to produce appropriate literature. According to Carlos Suria, SJ in “History of the Catholic Church in Gujarat”, Jesuit pioneers published several books with many editions between 1903 and 1911.

Fr. Suria quoting earlier historians like Vath says that “Stories of Old Testament” and “Stories of New Testament” by Fr. Aloysius Gyr were published in 1903 in 1904 respectively. “History of the Church” (Katholic Shrisabhano Itihas) by Fr. Constantin Einsiedler, SJ and a prayer book “Way to Heaven” (Swargno Rasto) by Fr. Josef Umbricht, SJ were also published in 1903. The two books saw many editions. Fr. Umbricht, also authored “Major Catechism” with 358 pages in 1904 and “Bibliographic Profile of Saints” in 1905 (History of the Catholic Church in Gujarat by Fr. Carlos Suria, SJ, p.127).

The pioneer Jesuits shortly after their arrival in Gujarat planned to launch a magazine. The plan materialized in January 1911 with the launching of the monthly The Messenger of Sacred Heart, DOOT in short, in Gujarati. The total numbers of Gujarati Catholics in 1911 were less than two thousand! The vast majority of them were illiterate! With different Protestant denominations the total Christian populations then were less than 20,000 in Gujarat.

The Jesuits even without the mastery of the Gujarati language brought out DOOT month after month. The editor’s name is not printed in DOOT from 1911 to 1926. History points out to Fr. Umbricht, as the editor of DOOT from 1915 till his death in 1922. Then, there was an interruption in the monthly publication of DOOT at his death in 1922.

Navajuni (NJ-Things Old & New) No.2 of June 1973 describing Fr. Umbricht’s responsibilities says, “Another job that kept him busy was writing and publishing the Messenger of Sacred Heart, (DOOT) and his books and booklets of apologetics against the assault of the non-Catholics on unguarded villages. My impression is that some of the booklets were far above the

heard of the would-be readers, Catholics or otherwise. But his booklet on contribution was a gem”.

Jesuit missionaries who knew some Gujarati and the Catechists helped the Jesuit editors both with the content and with the distribution of the magazine to those who knew to read. The Catechists and school teachers themselves gathered the village people and read the articles in the magazine and instructed the people in faith.

For the first 15 years from January 1911 to October 1926 DOOT was printed at the Examiner Press, Bombay. A land-mark in the Jesuit media pioneering is the starting of Anand Mission Press in 1926 and printing DOOT and other Christian literature from November 1926 onwards to promote faith formation of Christians and evangelization.

Another landmark in the print media ministry was the launching of Gujarat Catholic Truth Society (GCTS) by Fr. Charles Gomes, SJ in 1938. The Ahmedabad Missionary (TAM) has quoted Fr. Gomes about the origin of GCTS. “The very first donation I got as a Priest when I preached a mission in Bhavnagar was Rs.75/- (quite an amount in 1938!) And I got the Superior’s permission to credit it to GCTS! And a good old French Missionary sent me, I think, Rs.100/- or so for the same purpose and that is how the Gujarat Catholic Truth Society was born”.

From the beginning, as Fr. Hedwig Lewis in his book has quoted from TAM August 1974, GCTS carried on “Slowly but steadily its work of editing and propagating Catholic literature. After one and half year’s work by several Missionaries, the sixth edition of the Gujarati Catechism was published in December 1942, wholly renewed in style and Indian nomenclature”.

“With Anand as its centre, the Gujarati Catholic Truth Society (GCTS) published a good number of Gujarati pamphlets and books and helped the clergy to build up their personal libraries with the best and latest publications. (The Catholic Church in Gujarat, A Historical Survey 1934-1973, Hedwig Lewis, SJ, p.107).

Then, Fr. Joseph More, SJ, an erudite scholar and linguist was appointed as the Director of GCTS in 1957. He set up a GCTS bookstores at Anand not only with liturgical, catechetical and other spiritual books in Gujarati but he also made it a real bookshop for missionaries and educationists and others religious men and women with books in English on a variety of topics like scripture, theology, spirituality, psychology, etc. On my visits to Anand while I was the editor of DOOT in 1970-73, I had the opportunity to peep into his bookstore.

Fr. Javier Diaz del Rio, SJ, while he was still the parish priest of Karamsad Mission parish was appointed to take over GCTS in 1972. He closed down the GCTS bookstores at Anand and rechristened GCTS with the name Gujarat Sahitya Prakash (GSP) and continued publishing liturgical and biblical literature in Gujarati.

An outstanding contribution of the Jesuits to the people in Gujarat is the translation of the whole Bible into Gujarati by Fr. Isudas Cueli, SJ in collaboration with an eminent Gujarati translator

Late Nagindas Parekh. Fr. Diaz of GSP published it in 1981 with the title “Sampurna Bible” – ‘perfect’ or ‘complete’ Bible as some parts of the Bible were published during the preceding 16 years of translation.

In 1977 Fr. Diaz moved to Anand as full-time Director of GSP and set up an independent publishing house and bookshop in a two-storey building. Over the years GSP grew to become a publishing house for South Asian Assistancy and gained international repute with star authors like Fr. Anthony de Mello, SJ, Fr. Carlos Valles, SJ, Fr. Hedwig Lewis, SJ and other nationally and internationally known Jesuit authors.

The present-day Jesuits in Gujarat keep up the tradition of writing and authoring many books. Among them the most famous author is Fr. Carlos Valles who has written about seventy books in Gujarati and won many literary awards. Fr. Varghese Paul has too written 34 books in Gujarati and three in English and has also won a few literary awards. A number of other Jesuits like Fr. Raymond Chauhan, Fr. Joseph Mangalam, Fr. Andrew Silvera, etc. have also published books in Gujarati.

But many Jesuit authors in Gujarat are known for their books in English. Apart from Fr. Valles, Fr. Hedwig Lewis and Fr. Varghese, Jesuit Frs. like Joseph Mattam, Ishanand Vempeny, Joseph Mangalam, Lancy Lobo, Manuel Diaz Garriz, Jose Heredero and Jose Antonio Corral have authored scholarly books in English and published them through GSP and/or other well known national publishers.

Fr. Valles besides his Gujarati books, has also published at least 27 books in English and 31 in Spanish. He is an internationally known author. Like Fr. Valles another internationally known author is Fr. Hedwig Lewis who has authored 30 books. Some of Lewis’ books have been translated into and published in many Indian and European languages.

Today many Jesuits in Gujarat have ventured into writing both in English and much more in Gujarati and have published articles in DOOT and other publications. Jesuits like Frs. Francis Parmar, Vinayak Jadav, Jimmy B. Dabhi, Anil Sevrin, etc. are established names as writers in Gujarati though they have yet to author books.

The past and present Gujarat Jesuit writers are certainly keeping up the tradition of intellectual apostolate in the Society of Jesus. It is a great tribute to the Founder St Ignatius Loyola who has authored not only the Jesuit Constitution but also his Autobiography and the Spiritual Exercises – two classical books in spiritual literature. (contact the author: ciss@satyam.net.in)

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