

Rewriting History of Christianity in Travancore by Re-Locating Vethamonickam As the Founder: A Postcolonial Reading

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Abstract

Vethamonickam, a significant personality in Travancore's Christian history, is often remembered merely as the first convert rather than the first native protestant missionary. Despite his early spiritual service from 1801 and his role in sustaining Christian faith locally, colonial historiography prioritized foreign missionaries like Ringel Taube, who was credited with founding the first Protestant church in 1809. Postcolonial theory critiques this Eurocentric narrative, which marginalizes indigenous contributions and frames colonized people as passive recipients of Western influence. It calls for reclaiming suppressed histories and recognizing native agency. *Vethamonickam's* erasure reflects the broader colonial tendency to admire foreign intervention while ignoring natives' leadership. Re-reading history through a postcolonial lens challenges institutional biases and seeks to restore *Vethamonickam's* rightful identity as a pioneering missionary. His story exemplifies the need to decolonize historical narratives and honor him who has shaped the communities with faith and service. Even though his early and impactful mission work; preaching, teaching, and planting churches were documented, colonial historiography prioritized foreign missionaries, who were given prominence due to their association with colonial rulers. *Vethamonickam* was not allowed to baptize and imparted as an assistant reflected the hierarchical and imperialistic mindset of the time. However, native communities recognized his spiritual leadership, bestowing titles such as *Desabakthan*, *Desikar*, and *Periya Upadesiyar*, affirming his role as preacher, teacher and missionary. Writings of Ringeltaube, Charles Mead, Hacker, and Bishop Middleton have acknowledged his foundational role in spreading Christianity in Travancore. Postcolonial critique reveals how colonial history marginalized native voices, treating them as "missional others." *Vethamonickam's* life and legacy challenge this narrative, offering sufficient evidence to reclaim his rightful identity as the first native protestant missionary in Travancore.

Keywords: Vethamonickam, Postcolonial theory, Ringel Taube, Travancore, protestant missionary

Introduction

Vethamonickam is a multifaceted personality in Travancore he has contributed to the people of his regions as well as the Christianity in different ways. However seldom he is regarded as first convert in Travancore region. The people in and around his native villages who witnessed his service had different views about his mission. There are people who believe that Vethamonickam was the first native Protestant Missionary in Travancore region the prominent understanding is that Ringeltaube was the first missionary. Why and how Ringeltaube came to the limelight is unknown, inspite of the faithful service of Vethamonickam is an

unanswered question. Therefore, an attempt is made to re-read the history to locate Vethamonickam in his rightful identity through post-colonial theory.

1. Postcolonial Theory and Historiography

Postcolonial theory deals with the reading and writing of literature written in colonized countries, or colonized peoples. It focuses particularly on the way in which literature by the colonizing culture distorts the experience and realities, and inscribes the inferiority, of the colonized people on literature by colonized peoples which attempts to articulate their identity and reclaim their past in the face of that past's inevitable otherness. It also deals with the way in which literature in colonizing countries appropriates the language, images, scenes, traditions and so forth of colonized countries (Praveen, 2016).

Postcolonial historiography is about breaking the dominant Western narrative model of history and recreating the real history of the people. Postcolonial historiography seeks to dismantle the Eurocentric tradition that was deeply embedded in modern Western historiography. One of the epistemological foundations of this tradition was the historicism developed during the Enlightenment, which could be characterized by the view of history as rational and progressive, i.e., that reason is the ultimate cause of social development, and that as reason enters all spheres of society, humankind will continue to progress and eventually move towards the perfect ideal society. Under the influence of this concept, "religious beliefs, morals, legal concepts, language and institutions," among others, "were interpreted from a developmental point of view," with no exception for historical writing. A postcolonial historiography critiques the way in which modern independent states continue to write history within a colonial historical discourse, seeking to continue to exclude the Western discourse that once dominates the historical account of the colonized through the mandate (Nayar, 2008). As Gyan Prakash emphasizes "Critical history cannot simply document the process by which capitalism becomes dominant, for that amounts to repeating the history to displace." (Xupeng, 2022).

2. Vethamonickam: The Native Men

Vethamonickam belongs to a landlord family (Sivaraman, 2019) fully devoted to *Saivism*. Their ancestors for generations were cultivators near Tanjore in the Chola Kingdom, who had left their native place and came to South and lived in *Vallanad*, east of Palayamcotta in Tirunelveli (Agur, 1903). Then migrated towards the south and settled at *Myлады* in the Southern region of Travancore in the early part of the eighteenth century, where they built houses on the lands granted by Government. When the *Puthanar* Canal was constructed Vethamonickam's forefathers converted dry lands into paddy fields. Living peacefully there, they engaged in astrology, native medicine and in composing poems in which they were well-versed. Being Saivites, they worshipped *Annamalai*, *Subramonyan* and *Elangomanian* (Agur, 1903).

2.1 Birth and Education

Vethamaonickam was born probably around 1750 and the precise date of his birth is not known. Whereas another account claims that he was born in 1763 (Joseph, 1984). His father passed away, in his early stage and the family still possessed little property (Agur, 1903). Maharasan's widowed mother brought him up in the tradition of a good Saivite (Maharasan, 1984). His mother, being an intelligent woman trained him to earn his own living and taught him to read and write, sent to school (*thinnai palli*) along with his brothers and cousins. He was a very bright boy in his school career and he excelled in study over his brother and made excellent progress in his school lessons. He was well versed in Grammar, Astrology, and Mathematics etc (Agur, 1903). At the age of 27, he married a polite woman named *Sathiyayee*. She was

liked both by the poor and the great and was instrumental in bringing a good reputation to her and was determined to lead a quiet and peaceable family life. This exemplary life made his neighbors respect him (Agur, 1903). They had four children two daughters *Pakiyayi*, *Annaammal* and two sons Devasagayam and Moses (Agur, 1903) Vethamonickam fell ill and died on 27th January 1827 in praying posture (Gladstone, 1984).

2.2 Life before Accepting Christ

Influenced by his mother's zeal, he strictly observed religious practices like fasting, temperance, and purity, preserving his caste and rituals. His devotion led him to endow a land and build a temple for *Elankamanyan*. Seeking a personal experience of God, he made several pilgrimages, to *Tiruchendur* and to *Chidambaram*, driven by a desire for deeper spiritual fulfillment. He too visited his family deity *Elankamanyan* at Vallioor. Vethamonickam went for a pilgrimage to find peace, accompanied by his nephew *Sivagurunathan* (Jacob, 1975). Encouraged by his relatives, especially his cousin *Perumal*, (Stephens, 1985) he set out for *Chidambaram* in 1799 A.D. expecting a sacred atmosphere, he was shocked to find the temple full of impiety. Disturbed, he fell asleep leaning against a stone pillar and had a vision of a man with a stick who warned him to leave the temple immediately and return to his village, promising to show him the right path. His journey was being divinely guided, travelled to Tanjore to his cousin sister and brother-in-law where Protestant missionaries were ministering marked a turning point in his spiritual journey (Joseph, 1984).

2.3 Contributions of Vethamonickam

Vedamanickam was the first protestant Christian in Travancore. Before the arrival of missionaries, he preached the gospel and encouraged many natives to accept Jesus (Joy Gnanadhasan, 1996)

2.3.1 Vethamonickam's Missionary Legacy

In 1801, Vethamonickam returned to his village, Mylaudy, with a strong zeal for Christian missionary work. As a trained missionary, he began preaching the Gospel first to his family and friends, then extended his outreach to visitors and nearby villages. He condemned idolatry, shared Bible-based moral teachings, and distributed Christian tracts such as *Proverbs*, *Surukkamanavibram*, *Meynanavali*, and *Mohshavali*. His life and witness inspired many, and about thirty-one individuals became the first Christian community under his guidance formed the nucleus of the Protestant Church in Travancore (Pickett, 1933). Vethamonickam held daily prayers, taught Scripture and catechism (*Gnana Upathesa Kurippidam*), and used Lutheran forms of worship. He introduced the Lutheran Common Prayer Book from Tanjore and used materials from the Tranquebar Missionaries for teaching and sermons. By 1805, his congregation had grown to 150. Previously known as a devout *Saivite* and a frequent pilgrim, Vethamonickam's conversion to Christianity surprised many (Gnanadhas, 1999). He faced skepticism and resistance, especially from those who once revered him in his Saivite faith. Despite challenges, he persisted in his mission work, resulting in the establishment of a church in *Usaravilai*. By 1806, during a stay in Kollam, he was motivated to preach to the people (Agur, 1903).

2.3.2 Persecution as a Missionary

Persecution is often a sign of genuine evangelistic work, and Vethamonickam experienced this as he spread the Gospel in Travancore. As Christianity began to gain ground, opposition arose, particularly from high-caste religious leaders who upheld the caste system. Vethamonickam was harassed, hated, and eventually expelled from his caste. Even his own relatives turned against him. Unlike typical first converts who were pressured to abandon their new faith, Vethamonickam faced persecution not just for converting,

but for actively preaching and spreading the Gospel. This distinguishes him as a true missionary. His sufferings reflect the broader reality of Christian missionaries in India, where persecution often accompanies evangelistic efforts (Gnanadhas, 1999).

2.3.3 Social Transformation as his Missionary Vision (1801-1809)

Vethamonickam integrated social reform with his missionary work, aiming to uplift society and eliminate caste-based oppression. He focused on education, planned to build churches and schools, and worked tirelessly to bring enlightenment and social equality (Jacob, 1975). He opposed superstitions, discouraged the reading of mythological texts among Christians, and stopped religious drama performances and horoscope practices. Promoting equality, he preached the Gospel to all castes and helped the poor generously from his own income (Joseph, 1984). He supported Christians during times of hardship, offering them comfort and guidance. To spread the Gospel culturally, he encouraged traditional art (*kalyal*) using Christian songs. He protected the people during the 1809 war and persecution. He also established *Gurukulakalvi* (*thinnaipalli*) schools to educate the people, showing his deep commitment to both spiritual and social transformation (Joseph, 1984).

2.4 Colonial Understanding of Vethamonickam

The colonial understanding negates the first native missionary identity of Vethamonickam. The colonial understanding of history is imperialistic and self-propagating. Especially in colonies, the history is how and what the colonial powers did in the colonies (Kumaradhas, 1990). Therefore, what the people in colonies contributed is immaterial to them. In this pretext, Vethamonickam was just recognized as a first convert and not as first missionary (Johnson, 2016). It is understandable that a spiritual service carried by Vethamonickam from 1801 in the same region is overlooked by the colonial missionaries (Hector, 1988). According to them the Indians are just objects of their service. On the other hand, in the first Protestant Church of the Travancore founded in May 1809, the foreign missionary Ringeltaube's name is acknowledged as a first missionary. The people in that locality knew that church services were conducted by Vethamonickam to help the people to remain in Christian faith (Kumaradhas et al., 1990). The Church activity is the first place where contribution from Vethamonickam was not recognized. Since a missionary from Germany Ringeltaube has come to plant churches, his contribution is given more prominence. The church in spite of her commitment to be unbiased body of Christ to recognize service from all, failed to recognize the service rendered by the local missionary to her but portrayed a foreign missionary as a pioneer missionary of Travancore mission (Kumara et al., 2003).

2.5 Relocating Vethamonickam's Identity as the First and Native Protestant Missionary

Even though church and the missionary writings do not recognize the contribution of the native missionary, there are many evidences to substantiate the missionary identity of Vethamonickam. Such writings are in favour of his missionary identity as well as attempt to recognize the early work done by him.

2.5.1 Re reading History through Postcolonial Lens

When a colonial period is evaluated to discover the unsung contributors in the history through postcolonial lens history must be critically evaluated. The postcolonial reading of colonial history challenges the imperialistic attitude of the colonizers and look for non-conventional sources to re-write history. With the postcolonial critique at the backdrop, looking the story of Vethamonickam new facts are discovered, in fact they are not new but hidden facts. Then a question arises, if Vethamonickam is carrying out the

mission work successfully, what could be the reason to bring Ringeltaube to the same mission field? The possible reasons for colonial mission enterprises were to have a companion for mission so that he can even escape from persecution (Dason, 1970). As in those days foreign missionaries were in relationship with the colonial rulers and the persecutors may not harm foreign missionaries so easily, the needed doctrinal and theological support to encourage the new believers and to baptize them (Dason, 1970). Ringeltaube was accompanied by Vethamonickam for spreading the Gospel. Whenever Ringeltaube came to *Mylaudy*, Vethamonickam prepared and brought the people before him to be baptized by him (Thankappa, 1978). The ministerial hierarchy was predominant as Vethamonickam had to request the missionaries to give baptism to the early converts. This fails to recognize his initiatives and rather valued the foreign missionaries. He was not allowed by the western missionaries to baptize the new believers (Agur, 1903).

2.5.2 Reclaiming Identity: Responses of People

It is important to know the response of his native people in calling and identifying him. There is some identification people express which claim that he is the first native missionary in that region representing the Protestant Mission in Travancore (Thankappa, 1978). It can't be ignored the identification of how the native people identified him. Some of the titles given to Vethamonickam are *Desabakthan*, *Desikar* and *Periya Upadesiyar* acknowledges his missionary work and pious life. Out of these three, the title *Periya Upadesiyar* is given only to those who preach from the bible. If he was known as only a convert, he could not have claimed this title. The fact the people identified him as teacher of the bible which the missionaries failed to do so. The titles that people added to his name had a message behind it. Since, this attempt is against the colonial history, where postcolonial history negates people are the prime focus and their voices are important. This is in fact the opposite of colonial approach in which people are treated as "missional other" (Samuel, 2019).

2.5.3 Re-reading Colonial Mission Historiography: Tracing References of Vethamonickam

In reading the history of Christianity in Travancore one cannot deny the positive statements of the important people about the mission of Vethamonickam and social upliftment in Travancore. Some of the direct quoting about the native missionary from Mylaudy are found in many missionary writings. In the year 1815, missionary Ringeltaube acknowledged when replying to Col. Munroe that Vethamonickam is the man who took first and full attempt to bring protestant Christianity into Travancore (Robinson and Somervell, 2013). The statement of Charles Mead is the direct indication for the mission work of Vethamonickam as the first native missionary and the first person who introduced Christianity in Travancore." Agur (1903) "I was induced to embrace the scheme of a Mission in Travancore was that of a Travancorian from Mylaudy with his son coming to Tranquebar to invite me. His original name was *Maharasan*, and he is now one of my native assistants." (Thoma, 1968). Hacker supports it by saying that Vethamonickam was the real founder of the Protestant Church in Travancore (Hacker, 1908). Bishop Middleton from Calcutta who visited Travancore on 27th March 1816 exclaimed the integrity of Vethamonickam's missionary work (Agur, 1903). Such writings colonized peoples mind by labeling Vethamonickam as a mere convert who was just the foreign missionary assistant. Such understanding ignores his missionary activities. Instead of promoting the understanding of readers that Vethamonickam is the first native protestant missionary it colonized their minds that Vethamonickam as secondary (Sugumaran, 2003). The above statements can rightly be claimed that, the native Vethamonickam as the first missionary to Travancore.

2.6 Missional Other: Nullifying the Native Missionary

Vethamonickam stayed for over six months to receive missionary training. Guided by Kohlhoff and other missionaries, he studied Christian theology and was equipped with a Bible and Christian books to strengthen his faith. Kohlhoff treated Vethamonickam not just as a convert but as a future missionary, preparing him for evangelistic work. This preparation is evident in Vethamonickam's immediate and active Gospel outreach upon returning to Mylaudy. He returned home not merely as a convert, but as a trained missionary with renewed zeal and a clear purpose (Agur, 1903). This trained missionary was not considered as a Missionary but an assistant to Western missionaries can be seen clearly in the statement of Charles Mead is the direct indication for the mission work of Vethamonickam as the first native missionary and the first person who introduced Christianity in Travancore." (Neil, 1984). Among the few writings available about the Travancore pioneers there are few who have mentioned about Vethamonickam and acknowledging him as the only first protestant convert (Vallinayagam, 2005). According to S.S. Hector, "Vethamonickam is the first fruit of the protestant mission in Travancore". Though Hector fails to find his missionary identity, yet the statement proves that Vethamonickam as the first convert which also labeled him as the first native missionary (Hector, 1988). Kumaradas et al. (1990) stated that "Vethamonickam was the first Christian in the Kingdom of Travancore". Sugumaran (2003), places the native Vethamonickam as a first convert but failed to acknowledge his immense contributions as a native missionary. Colonial and Post colonial writings on Vethamonickam nullify his native mission and promotes him as convert which is the continuation of missionary writings on natives as "missional other". The colonial writings have to be reconstructed to put into the native parlance making native contributions as the subject (Agur, 1903)

2.7 Re-assuring Vedamnickam's Identity: Evidences from Native Writers

Many historians acknowledge the first missionary of Travancore was Vethamonickam. The writings of these historians bring light to the understanding of first and native missionary identification of Vethamonickam. C.M. Agur writes in his book *The History of Christianity in Travancore* (1903) about Vethamonickam, that the introduction of the Protestant mission which was brought into Travancore is associated with the personal conversion history of Vethamonickam (Agur, 1903). According to Jacob (1956) Vethamonickam, a humble citizen of Travancore bought and introduced Protestant Christianity in Travancore. In his book under the topic "Pioneer Protestant Missionaries to Travancore" he mentions Vethamonickam as the first missionary. Thankappa quotes Vethamonickam (1978) as "The first missionary", further says that there was a church at *Usaravilai* before the coming of western missionary to Travancore which was built by Vethamonickam. V. Joseph (1984) writes that Vethamonickam, was chosen by God to spread the gospel, was the forerunner of the Travancore Protestant Church. He created a platform for the London Mission.

S.S. Hector (1988) in his writing states "Protestant Christianity having been introduced into the country by a son of the soil called Vethamonickam, a native of Mylaudy." Dasan (1970) says that Vethamonickam brought Ringeltaube from Tranquebar to Travancore in 1806 while he was sharing the gospel and contributing to the society. He was the first leader of the Liberation Movement in Travancore. A.P. Vallinayagam (2005) says that Vethamonickam is the founder and parent of Protestant Christianity in Travancore State. Johnson (2016) writes clearly concerning the first missionary identity of Vethamonickam. He says that Vethamonickam should be awarded the historical excellence record for bringing protestant Christianity to Travancore. Protestant Christianity spread and has grown fastly by his

effort. He further says that one of the highlights of Travancore Protestant Christian history is the uniqueness set by a simple man from a very small village seeking forth truth.

Samuel (2019), in his book *'Vethamonickam Maharasan The first LMS Missionary in South Travancore'* says Vethamonickam was the first Indian Christian who started the missionary work in Travancore with his own effort. It resulted in the new Protestant Missionary Movement. He is known as the father of Protestant Christianity in South Travancore. From these explanations there are ample evidences from authentic personalities to describe Vethamonickam as the first missionary. The attempt here to due credit and recognize the one who sow gospel seed in his native village. In order to suppress the work of the Vethamonickam he was identified or presented in the history as 'first convert'. A first convert would only wait for the missionaries' arrival to be part of the church, but Vethamonickam never waited for that, rather he initiated mission work and organized western missionaries to come and work in Travancore.

2.8 Church Leaders on First Native Missionary

It is also necessary to know what the present leaders of the church understand about Vethamonickam. Since the Travancore mission field is now divided into three dioceses in the Church of South India for administrative purposes. A humble native missionary's contribution is to be recognized. Some of the church leaders do say about Vethamonickam's contribution and it is worth mentioning here, Samuel Amirtham (Former Bishop of South Kerala Diocese) quotes about Vethamonickam on his Memorial Day as "In 1801, Vethamonickam was the foundation stone to Christianity at Mylaudy." His statement indicated that Vethamonickam is the groundwork to the protestant Christian mission in Travancore (Dason, 1970). Christudhas (2008), the former bishop of Kanyakumari diocese says that "God used Vethamonickam to establish the Protestant Church in Travancore. He made a path for the ministry of LMS at Travancore as John the Baptist made the way to Jesus Christ's Ministry. He is the father of the first church and Protestant church at Travancore. He is The Apostle who gave us Christ." From his statement it is clear that the platform for Ringeltaube to do the missionary works in the region was none other than Vethamonickam.

M. I Kesari (Dason, 1970) says, Vethamonickam as the one who gave the Christ to the region of Travancore. He says "the Protestant Christianity was implanted by Vethamonickam in Mylaudy. Now it has grown and flourished as two dioceses which are Kanyakumari and South- Kerala." Oommen George says that "Maharasan Vethamonickam, the first Missionary in Travancore has been ignored in many ways. His contribution to Protestant Christianity in Travancore some time became the part of forgotten history." All these leaders' credits and acknowledges the missionary enterprise of Vethamnomickam who was the pioneer native missionary in Travancore (Dason, 1970).

3. Critique Through Postcolonial Lens

The emergence of the protestant Christianity in Travancore is associated in a most interesting manner with the personal history of the first convert Vethamonickam, with the conversion of his name by the missionary John Casper Kohlhoff who gave him a new name Vethamonickam. In postcolonial discourse, the native missionary occupies a deeply ambivalent space, both a product of imperial domination and an agent of its perpetuation. While often portrayed as a figure of spiritual transformation and upliftment, the native missionary's role in colonial contexts was far more complex, entangled in structures of power, identity, and cultural erasure. A postcolonial critique unmask this figure, not as a neutral evangelist, but as a key participant in the cultural project of empire. Vethamonickam was a native of Travancore, accepted

Christian faith at *Tanjore*, did a tremendous mission work before the arrival of western missionaries along with his family members planted churches and schools was the real founder of Protestant Christianity in Travancore. He was the instrumental in bringing LMS and for their mission in Travancore.

Conclusion

From the life of Vethamonickam there are sufficient evidences to relocate him as first native missionary of Travancore mission region centered on *Mylaudy*. He was the first to spread the message of Jesus to the people in and around *Mylaudy*. He was also the one who taught from the scriptures to the people and in schools. As a missionary he was persecuted for sharing the word. Even though some of the colonial missionaries with hierarchical mindset could not accept Vethamonickam as a first missionary, there are many leaders who do accept it. For a colonial mindset Indians should be at the receiving end and not at the giving end. Hence, it was factual that the missionary identity of Vethamonickam was purposefully and carefully changed as first convert in the colonial history. Thus, the attempt is made to relocate him from a first convert to first native missionary in the Travancore Region.

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