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The Contribution of The Catholic Church in Tamilnadu in The 17th-19th Centuries to an Understanding of Christ

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With the colonial expansion of the Portuguese, Christianity came into the Tamil country. St Francis Xavier inaugurated the Catholic church in Tamilnādu. Henrique Henriques, a disciple of Xavier was working in the fishery coast for fifty years till his death in 1600, at Punnaikayal. In the interior, Robert de Nobili, the Italian Jesuit, founded the famous Madurai Mission in 1606. His missionary adaptations and life had profound influence for the spread of the faith; his writings continue to nourish the faith of the Catholics even today. John de Britto spread the faith, particularly in the Marava country; but we have no books written by him. With the coming of Beschi, the Catholic church in Tamilnādu awakened to a new sense of pride and dignity. Beschi was a poet, a scholar and an apologist for the Catholic church. After him, missionaries like Rossi, who worked in Marava from 1736 for 38 years, Abbé Dubois, a French Foreign Missionary who worked in South India from 1792 for 31 years, Fr. J. B. Trincal (1845-1892) who translated the entire Bible into Tamil, helped the Church to grow. Of all the missionaries in Tamilnādu it can be said without hesitation, the influence of De Nobili has been profound and enduring.

Before we treat the Christological contributions of these missionaries it will be proper to know their background. Most of the early missionaries were Jesuits, products of the Counter-reformation in the Church; they had humanistic training in literature and philosophy; they were committed to defend orthodoxy in doctrine. De Nobili, for example, had said: 'First, it is obvious that the preacher must be a man of irreproachable life and bearer of a doctrine which, by its very soundness, will be a refutation of error'.¹

As foreigners, unfamiliar with the nuances of the language, customs and religious practices, they groped their way cautiously and slowly. De Nobili, for example, corrected Henrique Henriques' usage of certain terms: *Moksha* for heaven, rather than *Swarga* which is associated with the pleasures of the senses; *Sarvesuran*, a better word for God than *Thambiran*; several other foreign words like *Mēesai* for Mass (in Tamil

¹ Robert de Nobili, *On Adaptation*, ed. S. Rajamanickam, De N. Research Institute, Palayamkottai 1971, p. 9.

Mēēsai means moustache) were corrected and given new Tamil words.² 'Nobili coined the terms for Christian theology and prepared a proper vehicle for conveying Christian ideas. He christianised certain words and infused into them a new meaning: *Prasadam* for instance signified a gift from the temple. That he uses for grace, the gift from God. . . The Christian message became incarnate in Tamil thanks to his efforts'.³

The missionaries wrote books mostly for the converts from Hinduism, to nourish and strengthen their faith and to show how they were once living in darkness. The books were meant for common people rather than for scholars; the catechists and the new missionaries were presented with these books to spread the faith. A hundred years later Ziegenbalg would write appreciatively about these pioneers: 'They had the best mission in Madurai country. They were mostly Jesuits . . . they have to be praised more than the others, because they have learnt the language of these heathens and have taught them in this language and also have left to them many books in this language . . .'⁴

De Nobili knew the wisdom of the people whom he instructed and converted. 'You will agree with me that it is far from easy to bring such men (brahmins) to become disciples from teachers and to admit that they are inferior to you in knowledge. Hence what skill is required to teach them. *You have to present your doctrine as if it were not new to them and to make them somehow feel that what you say is already familiar to them*'.⁵ This piece of advice is given not merely in the spirit of missionary experience but in the spirit of sympathy, in accordance with the catholic tradition; and this spirit governed all his attempts at adaptation. In his book *On Indian Customs* De Nobili writes: ' . . . But what is yet more surprising, I discover in these texts even an adumbration of the recondite mystery of the Most Holy Trinity, the Most Gracious and Most High God vouchsafing doubtless even to these far distant lands some inkling of the most hidden secret of our faith through the teaching of some sage living among these people, in much the same way as by a rather mysterious inspiration He deigned to illuminate the sybils, Trimagistus and certain other masters of human wisdom in our parts of the globe . . . '⁶ De Nobili here seems to accept the Hindu Scriptures as a preparation for the Gospel.

De Nobili usually did not start his instruction from the History of Salvation or the Bible but from Philosophy, from the true nature

² cf. De N.'s *Reply to the Accusations of Gonzalo Fernandes on the use of Religious Terms*, ch. 3, in Henrique Henriques, *Flos Sanctorum*, ed. by S. Rajamanickam T. L. S. Tuticorin, 1967, pp. 732-738.

³ S. Rajamanickam, 'Robert de Nobili and Adaptation', in *Indian Church History Review*, Vol. I, No. 2, Dec. 1967, p. 85.

⁴ Ziegenbalg, quoted in V. M. Gnanapragasam, *Tamil in the Early Madurai Mission*, in *Caritas*, Dindigul, July 1963, pp. 145-6.

⁵ *On Adaptation*, p. 31 (emphasis added).

⁶ *On Indian Customs*, ed. S. Rajamanickam. Research Institute, Palayamkottai, 1972, p. 43.

of God and his attributes. It is true that we do not see him using Indian categories but scholastic categories; yet he effectively translates his ideas into understandable and familiar idioms of the people. Different arguments will be acceptable to different people, hence he marshals several arguments and examples to prove his point. De Nobili writes: 'If I do not give such arguments as they give, they will say that I have not known the reasons given in their sacred books'. He adds, 'some arguments, which are difficult to understand and which are unfamiliar to many, I write them again and again in different ways, so that they may be understood easily'.⁷ This confession of using scholastic categories in his book *Refutation of Transmigration* could be applied to many other works of De Nobili.

The apologetical tone of many of their works are to be understood properly by us. In the lives of De Nobili and Beschi we come across instances when a brahmin or a learned man come to dispute with them.⁸ In some places De Nobili tells that his inveighing against the puranic gods is not to offend anyone but to show better the way to heaven.⁹

Books apparently meant for the non-Christians treat mostly about the nature of true God and of true religion. Here De Nobili is apologetic; using philosophical arguments and the Puranas of the Hindus he proves the falsehood of the Hindu position and the correctness of his own position. In such works there is no mention of Christ. In such contexts Christ may not be understood correctly; Christ must be revealed only gradually and that too after ascertaining the right motive of the people who come for instruction.¹⁰ Balthasar Da Costa, who joined the Madurai Mission in 1640 and who translated into Portuguese the five volumes of De Nobili's Catechism wrote in his Introduction: 'Robert de Nobili did preach Christ crucified, but with due order and caution, so as not to give that which is holy to dogs or pearls to swine. In this he was following, without the slightest deviation, the example and teaching of the Apostles and of Christ himself, the Model of all preachers. Christ accommodated himself to the capacity of his hearers so much so that he never preached to them but in parables ...'¹¹

Thus De Nobili showed the reasonable character of the Christian faith. In this, we may say that he followed closely the method of St Thomas Aquinas, in his work *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Hence it was appropriate that De Nobili was popularly called *Tattuva Pôdagar*—the teacher of reality.

Further we may note that there was no comparable religious prose literature among the Hindus in those centuries; they were all in poetry.

⁷ *Refutation of Transmigration* (Punar Jenma Akshepam), ed. S. Rajamanickam, T. L. S., Tuticorin, 1963.

⁸ A. Sauliere, S. J., *Gnani and Yesupattam*, in *Caritas*, Jan 1964, pp. 67-76.

⁹ *Refutation of Calumnies* (Thushnathikkaram), T. L. S., Tuticorin, 1964, pp. 8-9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 29.

¹¹ Balthasar da Costa, *Introduction to De N's Tamil Catechism*, in *De N. Catechism* (Gnanopadesam) Vol. I. ed. by S. Rajamanickam, T. L. S., Tuticorin 1966, pp. 14-15.

Missionaries like Henrique Henriques, De Nobili and Emmanuel Martins were pioneers in Tamil prose, acknowledged by scholars. Hence we can understand the difficulty in finding categories and thought forms for the translation of Christian truths. In the first part of the 17th century, Tamil Catholic literature seems to have flourished; after that till we come to Beschi no book is known to be written that attracts our attention.

Perhaps the difference between the Hindu and Christian theological concepts may help us better to understand the missionary problem in conveying Christian faith in Hindu categories. The data of the Bible about God as holy, transcendent and historically revealed cannot easily be translated into Indian categories where God is understood in cosmic, immanent and mythological terms. In the first chapter of his Catechism de Nobili speaks of the etymological meaning of names attributed to Hindu gods; names like *Siva* (The Auspicious One), *Vishnu* (Omnipresent), *Brahma* (Pure Intelligence) etc. can be given to the Supreme Being as these qualities can be predicated to Him. But by common use, these names have already been attributed to false gods; they cannot, therefore, without confusion and error, be given to the true God. We should avoid also names originating from Puranas like 'the Blue-throated One', *Puranthaga*, *Arthanari*, etc. But we can use names that tell of his real attributes, names like Supreme Being—*Parapara Vastu*, *Sarvesuran*, One who has no beginning and end, Lord, *Swami*, etc.¹² In the case of the Christian Trinity, this Mystery is revealed by God and cannot come within the ken of the human intelligence and the names we use like Father, Son and the Spirit are analogical.¹³

Another point to be remembered is the spiritual background of the missionaries. The Jesuit missionaries were shaped and influenced by *The Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius and *The Imitation of Christ*, with their emphasis on renunciation of the world; such men found a kindred spirit in India. Their crusade against the triple desires of wealth, honour and pleasures were in line with Hindu idea of renunciation celebrated by the holy men like the four Saiva Saints, Arunagiri, Pattinathar, etc. Man is composed of body and soul; what matters really is the saving of souls. Within this anthropology the Catholics operated their theology and philosophy, in the Tamil country.

THE CONTRIBUTION TO CHRISTOLOGY

Henrique Henriques, the first Catholic missionary to master Tamil and also the Father of the Tamil Press, wrote for the Feast of Incarnation of Jesus that Jesus took humanity to repair the sins of Adam and to teach men to renounce the desires of pleasure and wealth and to show the path to heaven by his deeds and words. Already, here, we notice the idea of Christ as Teacher emerging.¹⁴

¹² cf. *Catechism*, Vol. III, pp. 7-14. For some years, in the beginning, De N. has been using the word *Siva* for God; later he changed this practice. cf. H. Henriques *op. cit.*, p. 738.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

¹⁴ Henrique Henriques, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

For the explanation of the mystery of Incarnation, *De Nobili* relies squarely on the Chalcedonian definition of the person of Jesus Christ. Using the scholastic categories of form and matter, causality and even the concept of *communicatio ideomatum*, he shows the reasonableness of this mystery.¹⁵

De Nobili gives four truths to test true incarnation: 1. There must be a great reason, i.e., to do a great favour; the greatest favour could be to help one attain the shores of heaven. 2. The one who comes to remove sin, himself should be removed from sin; also he who teaches others to renounce desires should himself have renounced desires. 3. One incarnation is enough. 4. As now the poets honour the princes as gods, in ancient days they created puranas and celebrated their incarnations. In this light De Nobili shows the Incarnation of Christ to be true.¹⁶

De Nobili's specific contribution to Christology seems to be his concept of Christ as divine Guru. Here, Guru does not mean a priest who offers sacrifices but one who teaches the way to reach the shores of *Moksha* or heaven.¹⁷ The Lord was incarnate so that as a guru he might teach men the way to attain the shores of heaven, and that he might find a means which would prevent men from falling into hell which they deserved by their sins; and this means would be in accordance with his infinite justice and mercy.¹⁸ By incarnation the Lord had done two favours or graces: the first grace is by his holy life and true teaching to show to men the divine way to reach the shores of heaven; his second grace is to suffer in his humanity which he had assumed and united to his divinity and to do satisfaction for the sins of mankind.¹⁹ At the very first moment of incarnation, at the moment Jesus' human soul was created, God spoke to his soul. 'With body I am sending you to the world. There going about as a guru, show all men clearly by your conduct and words, that they must renounce all that is sin and that they must walk in the path of virtue so that they may attain the shores'.²⁰

When Jesus came to be baptized, John the Baptist addressed him: 'Thou who art Lord and divine Guru . . .'²¹ At the time of his baptism the Father revealed that Jesus was truly his son, that Jesus had come as *Satguru* to teach the truth clearly and to open the gates of heaven closed by sin.²²

¹⁵ cf. *Catechism*, III, pp. 132, 336, 406.

Refutation of Calumnies, ch. 6.

Instruction (Upadesam), ed. S. Rajamanickam, T. L. S. Tuticorin, 1965, ch. 16.

¹⁶ *Refutation of Calumnies*, ch. 8.

¹⁷ *On Adaptation*, pp. 196-197.

¹⁸ *Catechism*, III, p. 139.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 310-311.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 416.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

²² *Life of Christ* (Sesunathar Sarithiram) ed. S. Rajamanickam, T. L. S. Tuticorin 1964, p. 29.

A true guru must be illustrious in observing the true *dharmas* of humility without measure, of prayer without ceasing and of penance that is hard. In the desert Christ's prayer and penance are seen; in his baptism we come to know the humility of Jesus, for Jesus tells the Baptist, 'Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness' (Mt. 3:15). According to De Nobili this fulfilling of the righteousness is humility.²³

Jesus revealed the mystery of the Trinity, taught how to pray, how to live in accordance with the will of God by observing his commandments and how to overcome the triple desires of honour, pleasures and wealth.²⁴ Jesus taught the people to love God above all things. Jesus taught like the dancemaster who teaches his students by himself dancing, like the king who teaches bravery and skill in warfare by himself taking part in fighting and like a mother who herself drinks the bitter medicine for the sake of the child.²⁵

Those who had spiritual eyes were able to know from his teachings that it was marvellously superior to all sciences of the world and that, therefore, its teacher could only be a divine teacher and his teaching the divine wisdom; by this knowledge many attained salvation.²⁶ Satguru Jesus illumines the minds by his teaching and enables men to act according to it.²⁷ To confirm his teaching of the way to heaven, the divine guru worked miracles.²⁸ That man may get the strength to walk in his teaching, the divine guru has given the divine nectar, the Eucharist.²⁹ Thus De Nobili calls Jesus by this privileged title of guru.³⁰ In his Sanskrit works too we find the title guru attributed to Jesus Christ.³¹

In the context of Madurai Saivism, this title 'Guru' is significant. For the Saivite, God himself comes in the form of a guru and imparts knowledge necessary for salvation. In the story of Manikkavacagar, a great poet and a saint, we read that God appeared to him as a guru and completely turned him into his *bhakta* from a minister of the Pandya King.³² The 8th Sutra of *Sivagnana Bhodam* says: 'The Lord appearing as Guru to the soul which had advanced in Tapas (virtue and knowledge) instructs him that he has wasted himself by

²³ *Catechism*, III, p. 232.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

²⁵ *Instruction*, pp. 120-122; *Catechism*, III, pp. 150-151.

²⁶ *28 Sermons*, ed. by S. Rajamanickam, T. L. S. Tuticorin, p. 122.

²⁷ *Life of Christ*, p. 35.

²⁸ *Catechism*, III, p. 290.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, III, pp. 139-140, 142; 143; 145-152; 184-185; 226; 232; 327-328; 454-455. *Summary of Catechism and 28 sermons*, ed. S. Rajamanickam, T.L.S. Tuticorin, 1965, pp. 2; 73; 81; 113.

Instruction, p. 99.

Life of Christ, pp. 34, 35, 59, 61.

³¹ *Upanayana Tarpanam*, Sk. MSS. Archives of Madurai Province, Shembaganur, p. 27.

³² Swami Sidhbbhavananda, *Tiruvacagam*, Sri Ramakrishna Thabhoanam, Trichirapalli 1970, p. 1.

living among the savages of the five senses; and on this, the soul, understanding its real nature, leaves its former associates, and not being different from Him, becomes united to His Feet'.⁸³

In his *Life of Christ*, De Nobili, in the context of Pilate and his wife talks of Jesus as Mahatma: 'Have nothing to do with such a Mahatma'; 'Pilate knowing that they have handed over this Mahatma out of jealousy . . .'⁸⁴

With regard to salvation De Nobili has some interesting things to say. After talking about the several reasons for Jesus' sufferings, he has a whole chapter dealing with questions like 'Why are only a few saved?' etc. . . God does not force a man into salvation; What by himself, he cannot do, God the Son has done, but man has to use his liberty and practise virtue and obtain salvation. Though God has done a very great mercy, he is acting only justly in demanding man's cooperation: otherwise it is not in harmony with his justice.⁸⁵

Will a good non-Christian who worships the only God and who practises virtues, attain heaven? De Nobili says that such a person, according to the opinion of theologians, will not go to hell but at the same time his natural virtues cannot take him to heaven, as heaven is a supernatural destiny. God will help him, seeing his good life, to attain heaven, by sending him a guru or someone else.⁸⁶

In another book, commenting on the text of 1 Tim. 2:4 'God desires all men to be saved', De Nobili says that even though God in his mercy desires the salvation of all, he has to act justly in giving heaven to men; those sinners who are ignorant of God and those who after knowing God do not do his will, will go to hell. Those who by their liberty deserve to go to hell, will not be given salvation. To those children beloved to him, God wills to give heaven which is everlasting life for man.⁸⁷

Commenting on the words of the Father at the time of Jesus' baptism: 'This is my only Son, with whom I am well pleased' (Mt. 3:17), De Nobili says that the Word of God by taking into himself the human nature in this world, has willed to accept men as his brothers; hence when we say that God the Father is well pleased with such a son, it is true that his brothers—men who accept Jesus—will become adopted sons of God and that with such sons God will be well pleased. Further the alighting of the Spirit of God on Jesus indicates the giving of the Holy Spirit in full measure to those who, by faith, become brothers to Christ.⁸⁸ De Nobili points out that Jesus because he was crucified and died on the cross, overcame the three enemies, of

⁸³ S. Thuraiasami Pillai, *Sivagnana Bodha Chemporul*, Sri Kasi Mutt, Tirupananthal, 1958, p. 8.

⁸⁴ *Life of Christ*, pp. 71, 62.

⁸⁵ *Catechism*, III, p. 432, pp. 430-444.

⁸⁶ *Refutation of Calumnies*, pp. 410-425.

⁸⁷ *Science of the Soul* (Attuma Nirnayam) ed. S. Rajamanickam, T.L.S. Tuticorin, 1967, pp. 484-485.

⁸⁸ *Catechism*, III, p. 228.

sin, satan and the world.³⁹ The merit obtained by his passion and death is enough for all men to reach the shores. His grace will be of help to all those who cooperate with him freely to attain heaven.⁴⁰ Thus we get a glimpse of De Nobili's soteriology.

In Beschi and other later writers we could see this theme being utilised for catechetical purposes. To prove Jesus' divinity and the authenticity of his religion writers fall back on the guru-theme with its implication: the wisdom manifested in his teaching, the holiness demanded by it and his holy and perfect life—the divine model.⁴¹

In Ceylon, *Joachim Gonsalves*, an Oratorian, had written several books. In the second part of his *Compendium of True Religion*, he treats of the mystery of Christ and his life. He uses many similies from agriculture and warfare. One who goes to fight practises with poles and sharpens his weapons. Similarly Christ at his baptism and in the desert, prepares himself for the fight with Satan, body, and the world.⁴²

Joseph Constantine Beschi's major work is *Thembavani*, an epic poem in honour of St Joseph. It is an adaptation of an Italian work; yet the whole story moves within the background of the Tamil country, with its hills and rivers, lands and towns; some of the characters have been given an Indian touch, like *Sivasivan*, *Vaman*, *Vaḷan* etc. The author states his intention in composing this poem: that people may come to know the Christian truths and that they may by observing all *dharma* obtain the heavenly bliss.⁴³ This poem consists of 36 chapters with 3615 poems of four lines each. It is fully in line with any of the classic epics of Tamil literature like *Seevagachinthamani*, *Kamba Ramayana*, *Peria Puranam*, etc. It will be difficult, to find a systematic treatment of Christ or his work in this poem, though it abounds with stories from the Old and New Testaments:

St Joseph sings a lullaby to Baby Jesus:

The Abode of mercy, the ocean of joy
I am blessed to see you sleeping
For the heart that is wounded, you are a remedy incomparable
O grace-filled love . . .⁴⁴

. . . .

You have come as a guru, why do you hide yourself?
You are the bright sun to destroy the darkness of evil,
Why don't you shine?
You are born to bring joy to the world, a joy that is heavenly.
You who deserved unremitting love, O Treasure Supreme,
Such a great mercy must be seen by both the eyes and enjoyed. . .⁴⁵

³⁹ *Life of Christ*, p. 85.

⁴⁰ *Catechism*, III, pp. 430 and 444.

⁴¹ J. B. Trincal, *Satya Veda Paritshai*, Pondicherry, 1846, pp. 189-191; 193.

⁴² Joachim Gonsalves, *Satya Vedanusarabhandham* (1734), St Joseph's Press, Madras, 1886, Part II, pp. 33-341.

⁴³ C. Beschi, *Thembavani* (3rd Edit.) Mission Press, Pondicherry, 1927, pp. 36, 132, 133.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 10:138.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 10:148.

Alien, a conscientious minister to Herod, tells him on the occasion of the visit of the Magi:

He is the unsurpassing one in the world, none to compare him in his execution of his triple functions of creating, preserving and destroying.

Because of his great love,
To destroy sin born of non-truth,
taking a body, he will be born as a man.
This is the truth written in the vedas.⁴⁶

Beschi takes up Indian puranas and stories to express his own ideas. For example, nobody will miss the Saivite story of Siva drinking the poison to save the world when Beschi sings of Christ's drinking the bitter chalice for the sake of saving mankind.⁴⁷

Beschi's prose works are mostly apologetical against the protestants, though the relations between Beschi and the Tranquebar missionaries were occasionally very cordial and ecumenical.⁴⁸ Beschi himself mentions that his catechists used to memorise the 28 sermons of De Nobili and used them for the purpose of instructing the neophytes.⁴⁹ This again confirms De Nobili's enduring influence.

Beschi's contemporary, Antony Kutty Annaviar, was a poet; his hymns to Christ are simple yet beautiful. He too invokes Jesus as Guru; the Guru who came to teach truth, the satguru that came to show the path of wisdom, He addressed Christ as *Paranjyothi, Paranatha, Yogasanga Jeyanatha, Gurunatha*, O Mountain of Grace, etc.⁵⁰

It can be said that in general that the Christian poetry has not much influence on the faith or devotion of most of the Catholics. Perhaps to the learned it might have been of some inspiration. In some prayer books of the last century we notice that Christ is invoked as the teacher of the religion of grace, Ocean of mercy, Guru of my heart etc. . .⁵¹

In this rapid survey we have indicated chiefly the great contribution of Robert de Nobili to an understanding of Christ in India. I hope this article will stimulate some to study De Nobili in greater detail. Fr Sebastian de Maya who was imprisoned with De Nobili wrote in 1640: "The gentiles who come from morning to night to

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 25:43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 9:122.

⁴⁸ V. M. Gnanapragasam, *A Modern Missionary in Caritas*, Dindigul 1966, pp. 43-53.

⁴⁹ Beschi, *Vediar Olukkam*, (6th ed.), Mission Press, Pondicherry, 1934, pp. 34, 64.

⁵⁰ Antony Kutty Annaviar, *Perinba Kathal, Yesunathar Swamiyin Bhala Thyanam*.

⁵¹ T. Maria Gnanapragasa Swamigal, *Sebhathyana Parvatham*, Vol. I and II. Kalaratnakuram Press, Madras 1868, Vol. III. Sanmarakini Matha Press, Pondicherry 1878.

visit us, far from insulting us show us compassion and even certain affection. Father Robert is constantly preaching the Gospel to them; and all go away pleased with his instructions and charmed by his polished courtesy . . . ' A personal acquaintance of De Nobili, Fr. Antony Proenca also wrote: 'He never spoke of religion to a Hindu, however learned he may be, without driving conviction into his soul . . . ' ⁵² Such praises combined with the fact of a flourishing church of thirty thousand Christians, at the time of De Nobili's death in 1655, may inspire us to study De Nobili and his contribution to Christology.

⁵² Cf. S. Rajamanickam, *Robert de Nobili presents Christ to the Hindus* (a paper read at Ranchi on Dec. 29, 1967, during the Triennial Conference of the Indian Christian Theological Association), pp. 19-20.