

## Elements of Ashram Tradition in Christian Indian Faith and Worship!

My occasional writings in the name of Kristukula Ashram/*asiramam* in Tirupattur, or Indian Christian Asiramam Movement have made some wonder. My concern has been, how is the Tamil idea of *asiramam*, meaning great or intense effort, suitable to organized churches, for instance, the like of protestant Church of South India (CSI)? Further, how would the confessing of the teachings of Lord Jesus Christ with Indian veneer matter in our ordinary individual lives, dispersed as we are mostly in urban and even westernized settings everywhere? I raise these queries as a layman without appearing to be a churchy person. Nor as an *asiramawaathi* (Ashram stalwart) either, but again as a layman who has been much affected by *asiramam* culture.

Broader Context: Worldwide Christianity, apart from its countless denominations, has as many cultural edges to it as there are cultures. There is a certain pietism known as Indian pietism. The pluralism of our culture would suggest a variety of cultural edges to it from India alone. Christian Indian ashrams may or ought to emit a commonality of pietism of their own. At the same time, to be in sink with the universal identity of being a Christian, it is absolutely necessary for our pietism to be grounded in Lord Jesus Christ. We will explore that mystery in India with the necessary historical Tamil edge. Mentioning of that edge cannot be the put-down of Tamil-centeredness. This is done in the environment of an in-admitted cultural crisis in India and an in-admitted crisis of faith among Christian Indians. Brief segmented synopses in their historical roots presented here would help our thinking.

Review of Ashrams: There has been countless number of Christian Ashrams since late 19<sup>th</sup> century CE. Of these, those that have been initiated by our Catholic compatriots are in larger number. One may say that the Catholic ecclesiastical umbrella has readily recognized, allowed the freedom, and provided resources for their clergy to engage in the contemplative spiritual exercises that are identified with Indian ashrams. In addition, the carry over of the legacy of the European monastic tradition has found a filial affinity with the tradition of Indian ashrams. Ordained Fathers, Mothers, Sisters and Brothers have led many of them in small intentional groups of meditation, retreat and study. Among Protestants, ashrams as such, fewer in number, have been there by laity initiative. One may presume the existence of countless prayer and study groups led by church leaders and laity as having semblance to *asiramams*. They may well be just intense praying groups, some times in silence, without any awareness of the ashram traditions as an impelling factor. In general, only a few of the Christian *ashrams* have been organized.

One of them is the legacy of Christhukula Ashram of Tirupattur, Vellore Dist. Many of you have been familiar with and involved in its earlier life. The CK Ashram's life has mattered because of the intrinsic merits of its *siramam*—efforts in service radiating its faith. It has been centred in Christ that his disciples had been able to radiate as his love, humanity, service and redemptive sacrifice. As an inspired idea, it has been very meaningful to those exposed to it. The Tamil temple architectural style of the structures on the premise is deeply arresting.

Truly, a Christian ashram in its essence could not have anything to do with a place – mountain, desert, rural, urban, or any particular spot on earth. Nor does it really have anything to do with any great thinker— bearded or not, wholly renounced or not, or of any standing with followers or not. It is good to be aware, as will emerge later, that one can engage in the *siramam* of devotion wherever and pursuing whatever vocation. In any case, Jesus Christ has to be the

supreme model of the meditative attempts by individuals or groups. That could be the only reason for and fulfillment of the *siramam* attempts. The founders of the Christhukula Ashram had received the *tharisanam* (of seeing or experiencing) of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Their *tharisanam* made a blessed difference to themselves and to their neighbours. It was the result of their *siramam*, of surrendering (*saranam*) to *Thaiva siththam* (God's intent, grace, plan). There have been countless "clouds" of witnesses of all times and places that have lived with the certainty of having had the *tharisanam* of God's guidance in their life since the time of Jesus to this day. We have many among us that humbly live with the certainty of God's *siththam* and radiate it. In the CK Ashram tradition the four devotional Tamil phrases—*siramam*, *tharisanam*, *siththam* and *saranam* could be culled out as key points of its prayers, worship and lyrics.

*Asiramam* or *ashram* generally carries a physical imagery as a forest retreat of spiritual seekers leading a contemplative life. One may imagine them bearded and poorly clad and seated under large shady trees, or in open space under thatched roof. Individuals could do their meditative *yogams* (yoga – a Tamil word meaning exercise), or a group of disciples could be seen learning from a *guru* (Tamil word meaning a teacher) at such spots. Simplicity and renunciation were prominent values of the meditative life in Tamil *asiramams*. The life at an *asiramam* had always been a self-chosen one of renounced life of seeking one's Self.

As a serious *siramam* to retreat from all organized life, the idea of architectural physicality of the spot of retreat could not arise at all in Tamil culture that saw the earliest *asiramam* tradition. Though it was also most proficient in temple architecture, the simple and severe nature of meditative life that *asiramam* represented did not invite architectural enhancement of the places of retreat in Tamil culture. Being organized as an entity was not a feature of the original idea of *asiramam*/ashram. There was something in the nature of spontaneity, of fluidity of personal choice, and of freedom in spiritual seeking that made *ashram* tradition an un-organized movement. The idea of pilgrimage to any holy spot or a mystifying *guru* to attain wisdom or worldly blessings is rather an overdrawn fixation on the idea of self-seeking within.

*Asiramam Organised*: Gradually a new feature of theistic devotional aspect of meditation came to enliven it. Devotion came to be accompanied by fine arts of singing and instrumental music as well as dancing. By the way, the classical music system with the earliest music notions (and ragam, thalam, and pallavi) cheerfully known as Carnatic music (music of Karunadu [dark country]– Karnataka) and Natya Kalai (seen as Bharatha Natyam) had evolved primarily as part of the Tamil culture's meditative, devotional and theistic life—a cheerful organized aberration!

Yet organized volunteerism to serve the needy, a recognized renounced person becoming a teacher—the *guru*, and the imparting of *siththars'* medicines and physical exercises—all these developed in due course as features of some *ashrams*. Historically, some other organized features, one could say, became suddenly prominent. For instance, Aryan homesteads had been nurseries for inculcating their own self-centred values and rituals for their young. Suddenly some of the *ashrams* also became centres for teaching Sanskrit knowledge, rituals, calisthenics, archery and such extraneous things to larger bodies of the chosen. This happened in all likelihood around 7<sup>th</sup> century CE with Aryan success in imposing aryanisation on Tamil culture. By subsuming major cultural features of Tamils as their own, Aryans could be said to have become *vedised* – Vedic Aryans. Thus some of the ashrams came to be called schools of Indian culture/knowledge. Hopefully this dim historical glimpse helps to understand the distance the ancient spiritual idea of *siramam* has traveled.

**Thematic Ideas of Asiramam:** Tamil grammar holds that words must have substance to be of linguistic value. In that light, *asiramam* was an ancient phenomenon of Tamil cultural experience. Several thematic ideas of *asiramam* generated by it are well known in world vocabulary. We may add a little more substance to the idea of *asiramam* in this essay. Two other thematic ideas —*tharisanam* and *saranam* derived from it should also be identified. Two more closely related ideas are *tharumam* (*dharm*) and *karumam* (*karma*). These may not be directly derived as cognates from the above two; it would be helpful, any way, to recognise the sanskritised accretions in them all.

**Siramam:** The whole root and stem of *asiramam* is the Tamil term *siramam*, meaning effort, engagement, and even strenuous effort. With the prefix of ‘a’ added (minimally meaning, greater) it gets transliterated to become Sanskrit’s *a-shram*. Shrunk as *shram* in *ashram*, it is now widely presumed to be a Sanskrit original term! This much needs to be said that the ideological implications of *Shram* are of Vedic ideological twist. It is a distortion that was designed primarily to serve the ethnic racism of Vedic Aryans. Whereas, Tamil *siramam* signified the universalism of their belief in ‘One God, One Humanity’, probably from earlier days of *Sangai Kaalam*.

**Tharisanam:** Another profoundly meaningful Tamil word in ashram traditions is *tharisanam*. It is the spiritual experience of the presence of *Iraivan* through one’s meditative and devotional *siramam* (effort). *Iraivan* was the immanent universal creator God of Tamil monotheism that is deeply explicit in the early Tamil *Saivam* and *Vainavam*. Simply put, it refers to experiencing the presence of God within one’s (loosely interpreted as) heart. More precisely, the creator *Iraivan* is not an abstraction up in the universe somewhere but experienced in human awareness in one’s *nenjam* or *manam*. It is good to note that human awareness as the dwelling place of God escapes the difficulty of referring it to physical location of heart or brain. The important thing is to know that *tharisanam* was and is a significant Tamil theistic/theological term that is sanskritised as *darshan*. Let it be clear, such a rendering of Tamil in Sanskrit is not the problem, but the Vedic mind’s need for oppressive splintering of Indians behind such misappropriations is. Admittedly, this is painting by broad strokes, but necessary. To elaborate it further is beyond our focus.

Now it is significant to note the coincidence of the Tamil idea of *tharisanam* of God’s presence in one’s awareness with the Christian belief of “Immanuel—God with us” declaration. The term *tharisanam* including other terms are used in Christian liturgies, prayers and the *keerthanais* (lyrics), particularly in Tamil and Malayalam. One may suspect that they may not be with the awareness of their *senhamiz* meanings of the *Chera-Chola-Pandyas* days, but more with their sanskritised twisted meanings. It would be good to know that the ordinary habits of prayerful devotions of many in their private rooms and the kneeling and head touching the floor in the cultural tradition do confess the *asiramam* spiritual experience of that nature.

**Saranam:** The nature of *Tharisanam* being a state of spiritual awareness, it is said to embrace mind, body and soul in surrender to the immanent God of the universe. The word surrender in itself is the meaning of *saranam*, a Tamil root word. Surrendering or becoming obedient to god’s will in Tamil usage is rendered as ‘taking refuge’ in both the Buddhist and the Jain traditions.

**Tharmam:** The word *tharmam* or *tharumam* meaning ‘giving’ has no direct relationship to Tamil *asiramam* tradition. Yet, the idea of ‘giving’, the virtue of ‘*eegai*’ in Tamil, has been turned into Sanskrit’s *dharm*—as in *varnashramadharm* of the colour-coded idea of an enforced ‘duty’ of the ordered society of Vedic-make for Vedic purposes.

**Karumam:** Similarly, the Tamil word *karumam* or *karmam*, merely has the mundane meaning of ‘action’ or ‘work’. In Sanskrit’s twist, the simple meaning of action or work of *dharm* is turned into the ominously qualifying action of Sanskrit’s *karm* or *karma*, to mean—the performance of one’s *self-determined fate* as one’s assigned duty. It is amazing to see the word *karma* has gone wild worldwide with the craziest sanskritised notion of it to mean anything but freedom of choice! The terms *dharm* and *karma* that are found in Christian worship are the abused Sanskrit meanings. Unknowingly to incorporate such terms as just Tamil words in our worship forms is serious mistaking. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that great many Tamil words have been employed in *ashrams* of a variety of persuasions –Jain, Buddhist, Christian, Tamil Sivaite and Vainavite, Vedic Shaivite and Vaishnavite, Zoroasterian and Sikh, not to mention the merchandized yogic types. The root meanings of the words, of course, would be totally obscured, let alone them being thought as Tamil words.

For the purpose of this review, it is important to be aware that the above thematic ideas that carry simple and direct meanings of an empirical and theistic (one God one humanity) Tamil culture is sustainable in Christian Indian worship. Their Sanskrit alterations in form and substance are contrary to Tamil usage and substance. It is not mere linguistic verbal conflict between Tamil and Sanskrit. It is a fundamental historic problem of epic proportion that began in the early Common Era (CE). Beyond the Vedic Epics of Mahabharatham and Ramayanam, the real epic struggle is between the historic theme of the organic universalism of the humane values of the land as evidenced in the ancient Tamil culture, on the one hand, and, on the other, the later-day historic theme of synthetic Vedic values that was designed to serve the interests of Aryan racism that is still the dominant feature of Indian life.

Development of the *Asiramam* Tradition: The assumption that *Ashram* is of Indian origin says little. It arose in the ancient Tamil culture that had spread far and wide over greater part of the sub-continent. A surprise to great many! Archaeological evidences link the *kadal konda* (swallowed by the sea) Lemuria culture with the Indus culture. Several parallels between them show in the direction of the probability of ancient Tamil culture. That would make the beginnings of Tamil culture to earlier times of 11000 BCE. We will limit to the greater probably of the *Third Sangai Kaalam* of 800 BCE to 300 CE to situate the *Asiramam* beginnings in Tamil theistic tradition. As to theism as an advanced religious thinking and practice we have its earliest historical underpinnings in Tamil literature. One would see that simply by observing the basic linguistic expressions of the practices of *ashrams* in general throughout India. They are Tamil linguistic expressions of the beliefs and devotional practices of the earliest *asiramam* tradition. One does not have to be a declared philologist, etymologist or a linguist for that. The fact of their Tamilness can be empirically perceived as heard, read and seen today. Some verbal illustrations have been given earlier. Hence the origin of the idea of *asiramam* can only be situated in Tamil culture—as imbedded in the ancient and continuous Tamil culture of the Indian landmass. These historical facts are little known because they have been suppressed and ignored.

Briefly, the earliest evidences of the Tamil monotheistic belief was seen in the theistic pietism of the *asiramam* of the faithful. It was a strong prevailing mood of the culture during the late *Sangai Kaalam*. That spiritual mood commonly held then was spelled out forcefully in the still remembered and firmly uttered common Tamil truisms: “One God, One Humanity” (ஓர் கடவுள் ஓர் மனிதன்) and “Listen everyone, the world is my village” (சென்னை எல்லாம் ஓர் கிராமம்). Several others similarly broadcast Tamils’ humane universalism in their pietism. These alone illustrate the magnificent beginnings of the pietism of the Tamil *asiramam* tradition. Being a

dynamic amalgam, the humane universalism of Tamil empiricism has been an insistent and triumphant strain in the development of Indian culture to this day. That is a far off anticipation for this essay.

**(St.) Thomas in *Thamizagam*:** We will limit it to the development of *asiramam* tradition. (St.) Thomas' presence in India is of great significance and a great mystery in history, of the history of India in particular, for the development of that tradition. He came to the Indian subcontinent to live out the missionary mandate of his master, Jesus. He had humbled and surrendered to the will of God after openly confessing "My Lord, My God". He had truly renounced everything of life and chose a life of poverty and destitution to live out his call in a far off land without any clue to its culture. The meaning and purpose of his choice were not in any way self-centred, even like self-realisation. His background of the literary Jewish culture, its mysticism as well as its deep monotheistic thought and practices were part of his great conversion. His skills as a sculptor and a builder helped him make a living. Though the quality of generosity (*eegai*) was a celebrated virtue in Tamil culture, Thomas could not be pictured as a mendicant-with-a-bowl-in-hand meeting common people. Acclaimed as a doubter, he was essentially a practical person—rational, empirical and skeptically questioning, that is, broadly being inquisitive in scientific sense. All of them constituted in Thomas becoming a man of great faith of no ordinary kind.

**Uniqueness of Thomas' *Siramam*:** We must not forget the fact that Thomas could not and did not obscure the astounding fact that he was the first forerunner (not announced as such) of his great master whom he had confessed as his Lord and God probably a year earlier. Thomas had known Jesus intimately and admiringly and face to face as his celebrated human master until he put his fingers in the pierced side of his master. He had his great conversion then, as other disciples also did in accordance with the same master's grace.

Jesus was a regular Jewish young man of Galilee in Palestine. Being of deep mystical disposition from his very young age, Jesus felt called to be alone for forty days in self-denial, meditation, prayer, renunciation and submission to the will (*nenjam*, heart, plan) of the Father-of-All before beginning his ministry of service and salvation. Thomas had known the lived-benchmarks of Jesus' *siramam* as a human in his short life before his crucifixion. When he set out east on his mission, Thomas unmistakably knew the benchmarks as his master's footsteps for him to follow. That was, as though by premonition, he had had a great preparation by his master's live examples, for several uncanny things to happen in a culture he was to land in. Thus truly, not figuratively, Thomas had been fully trained at the feet of his master the ways of *asiramam* of an extraordinary kind even before his arrived in Tamil culture. The Tamil culture by its own osmosis, as it were, had been a well-prepared field of a highly literate, theistic and open culture for the missionary *siramam* of Thomas.

Yet, the historical sequence of Thomas in India can only be termed as stunning. Despite his fascinating personality, he looked rather poverty stricken, alone, and an alien. Unlike the other scattered alien Aryans roaming the land at the same time, even if he appeared as one of their skin types, Thomas in all probability became endearing to the natives. The combination of Thomas' personality and the new message of God's love of saving grace to all peoples on earth as his children would have been most heart-warming and most satisfying to Tamils of a cultured rational temper. Having been the most ancient maritime culture, Tamils were used to foreigners and accepted them generously on their land as traders and curious visitors. Tamil culture at that time virtually meant the culture of the South—south of *Thakkanam* (Deccan) embracing the

Tamil heartland from west and east coasts and including Lanka. There was really nothing strange about Thomas' appearing on this Tamil scene.

Yet, one has to bear in mind that at the time of Thomas, great many Tamils had also become Jains and Buddhists, the rationalist agnostics. As intellectuals, their debating spirit was zealously enlivened by their respective sectarian differences, sometimes not very peacefully, though. There were also the few interlopers in the land scattered in their uprooted and disheveled appearance that were furtively looking around as though displaying their instinct. They were the new racial, clannish and irreligious Aryans who were not particularly disposed or wished to be a rational kind. They did not quite fit the scene that Thomas observed, but their presence nevertheless had an ominous air about them. This scattered segment of aliens had to wait nearly three more centuries before turning the Tamil culture and soil as their own.

It is amazing to visualise this cultured but dynamically chequered scene that missionary Thomas was led to be in. Here was the forerunner Thomas bearing the shield of good-news that fitted like a glove the cultural hand extended from the Tamil Chera-Chola-Pandya land and its environs for 22 years—52 to 73 CE. And he died a martyr. Amazingly the good news that Thomas carried spread fast by his indefatigable *siramam* during the very short two decades from west to east coasts. Given the relatively smaller population density of the time, one could still imagine the first great mass conversions to have taken place on the land. In the same vein, one could also imagine Tamil culture undergoing an energized efflorescence. The reason was the merging of the Judeo-Christian culture with a distant organic entity –Tamil culture of similar identical blood type! There is no way that two empirically creative and monotheistic God-charged cultures could merge and pass off in a dormant state.

Where are the evidences? That is the rub. Surprisingly, to say that reactionary forces systematically erased away much of the evidences later is really no lame excuse, since it is dreadfully true. There are many material evidences available that escaped from the east to west coasts. Of them, the most significant are the written evidences of the Christian doctrines that Thomas taught. Some of them are referred to below. But, much of the evidences could be said to be self-evident from the very non-historical, rather anti-historical silence that has been drawn by the perpetrators of the systematic erasure. In any case, what could be considered as self-evident, including the fact of Thomas' was speared to death, could not be held beyond doubt but for the literary evidences of the Christian doctrines taught by Thomas. This rich field of great historical significance that was ploughed over to be forgotten is awaiting the *siramam* of Tamil, Malayalam and other scholars' to reconstruct the narrative of our culture.

In any case, the general literate and empirical temper of Tamil culture would have found the enquiring, empirical and humane mind of Thomas most congenial. His physical appearance of renunciation and self-sacrifice would have unquestionably merged in the prevailing *asiramam* tradition of the culture. The *Sandroar* (the learned) of the culture would have readily found their spiritual elements in what Thomas preached. The fundamental one could be the message of "Emmanuel—God with us". This was most resoundingly Tamils' worshiping experience of God that resides in one's *nenjam* (loosely understood as one's heart or mind). Ancient Tamil people would have cheerfully received this as the most acute tidings.

This identification of Christian faith with the pre-Christian faith tradition of Tamil culture could not really startle anyone. It is just wonderfully coincidental to Christian faith in God, the Lord of history and peoples of all cultures. Yet, as if in the trail of erasing, much of the so-called scholarly historical writings and references to these facts of great consequences about Thomas' missionary *siramam* would merely cite them as something that is traditionally maintained. Why

term the facts as of traditional belief as though legends? That is pretty odd in a land of massive legends! However, unfamiliarity with Tamil language or its pertinent literature is not the problem here; there are several forms of willful suppression of truths. It is adequate just to mention that fact without elaboration.

**Thiru Valluvar in *Thiru Kural*:** Thiru Valluvar is perhaps one of the greatest minds of the classical Tamil culture. Not surprisingly, he was its profoundly empirical social observer as an ethicist and critic. His couplets of great merit are indeed a complete survey of the entire Tamil culture in all its details. Signally for us, his succinct lyrics include hitherto ( at his time) unknown theistic understanding of God's sacrificial manifestation in the world, sin and salvation, and God's saving grace. Even to readers with any blinds, that much of the newness of the doctrines to the ancient Tamil culture would be straightforwardly clear. With historical insights, scholars affirm that Thiru Valluvar incorporated them in the *Thiru Kural* as the fundamental doctrines of the faith prevalent among people, and they credit the *siramam* work of Thomas for that. That view also establishes *Valluvar's* chronological identity most probably as a contemporary of our Thomas, if not his disciple, but certainly not earlier than Thomas. Since some scholars that have revealed this long hidden Christian message of Thomas in *Thiru Kural* happen to be of Christian confession, the whole thing is dismissed as of Christian bias. Yes, it is a Christian bias that dares to make historical facts explicit. To turn away from facts and choosing to remain uninformed of facts when they arise is inadmissible to scholarship. By our review, Thiru Valluvar was a great *asiramavaathi* in life. He never said that about him. To describe him so for the critical observation of his own environment is to be fittingly biased.

### **Other Literary Evidences:**

Subsequently, we have the great fund of writings of eminent thinkers of the Tamil *Saivam* and *Vainavam* of the theistic Tamil tradition. These critical thinkers are known as *Nayanmars*, *Alwars* and *Siththars*, and they are eminently of the *asiramam* tradition. In the course of 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, they affirmed in much literary proliferation the prevalent faith expressions—the god of the human heart, god as love, god's incarnation in human form, sin and salvation, one god and one humanity, the doctrine of trinity, equality and others. In that light, the vehement denunciation by some of the accretion of idolatry, atheistic and agnostic doctrines, human oppression in its colour coded divisiveness invading their culture is remarkable for escaping the historic erasure. The time period is 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. Of course, these thinkers have not identified themselves as Christians. The name of Thomas as a disciple of Jesus is nowhere acknowledged by Thiru Valluvar or by any of the later thinkers. They routinely acknowledge the genius of Valluvar as a thinker and a poet to emulate. Nevertheless, their great spirited writings are eminent literary evidences of the native roots of Christianity. That fact also remained unknown and ignored until the last eighty years until made assertively explicit by Christian scholars. The fact that the name of Thomas nowhere occurs in the evidences that escaped erasure is a great mystery that can be undone only by new archaeological finds. Otherwise, we are left with our reasonable inferences from what we have.

In addition, we may sum up here a few startling inferences from this segment on Thomas.

1. Of the material evidences available on the pioneering *siramam* of Thomas, the Christian doctrinal evidences found in Tamil literature are most telling and solid.
2. There are probably far more archaeological evidences on Thomas' work that still remain buried and the written scrolls and palm-leaf stacks hidden away, perhaps not wholly destroyed.
3. Thomas' missionary work in terms of theism could be seen as the forging of the monotheistic parallels of the Judeo-Christian

culture and the Tamil/Indian cultural thoughts. Similarly, in terms of mysticism, one can see his having forged the mystical parallels of *siramam* traditions of the two cultures. 4. The forging at two levels would be indicative that the impact of Thomas, being very substantial, had longer and broader lasting impact on Indian culture as a whole.

**Bakthi Movement:** The devotional worshiping of the deity with the intent of seeking *tharisanam* in one's heart clearly marked the development of a broad *Bakthi Movement*. *Bakthi* is a Tamil word. The Movement so identified began around 8<sup>th</sup> century CE among Tamil thinkers after or as a result of the total subjugation of Tamils and their culture by Vedic Aryan domination. But it is crucial to bear in mind that the substance (the *Porul*) of the merged spiritual thoughts consisted of the Sangai Kaalam's Spiritual thoughts that in turn merged with Thomesian teachings and ingested by Valluvar and the Saivite and Vainvite thinkers—these together was the energizing fuel of a near *asiramam Bakthi Movement* that became a new all-India phenomenon. This is little known and would be little admitted. Reason wouldn't be the basis for not admitting. Broader and deeper scholarly search and research are direly needed on the first two points.

**Indianisation of Christian Faith and Worship:** So, it can be said that the Christian *asiramam* tradition stands on its own. It is therefore of substantial import for adding the indianising edge to individual and to organized expressions of our faith and worship. To the extent a few have spoken and written about indianisation, it is perhaps more as a practical tactic for christianising our people. That would be as good a reason as for islamisation or, lately, hinduisation. Our purpose, however, is to see the need for indianisation of our faith in the light of the very ancient roots of the Tamil culture, as they have been the taproots of India as well. Still, since two fifths of Sanskrit has been determined to being Tamil root words, one may need to be aware of their plain root meanings in employing them in songs, prayer, liturgy or worship. The problem of Sanskrit is its intent.

Doctrinally, Indian Christianity as such is truthfully and indubitably indicated in this brief writing as the earliest native faith that birthed in the *siramam* of Tamil culture. By grace it has permeated the rest of the Indian sub-continent as it was. Hopefully this little review of *asiramam* could be an eye opener for much that remains covered to be opened by rigorous scholarship. To risk, there has not been any ecclesiastical or theological compulsion for concerted efforts to understand the uncanny coincidences of the culture of the Tamil Chera-chola-Pandias, on the one hand, and the fundamental details of Palestinian Judeo-Christian culture as witnessed by Thomas in Tamil heartland, on the other. Indianisation of our faith is not and cannot be a mere sentiment for narrow expansion of Christian faith. It is very much our concern for the humanity of our neighbours as they are. To affirm the ancient humane taproots for the regeneration of our pluralistic culture and help it move with mutually shared meaning and purpose of everyone being human is crucial on any one's part. In that context, Christians as well as our people of other faith identities have the mutual freedom of thought to persuade one another. Not to be persuaded does belong to the honoured area of freedom.

This review has enabled me to connect the scattered dots of the Indian origin of Christian faith. As I understand the ancient Tamil culture, it manifested in the mooring of the faith-inspired *siramam*. The insights drawn show the substance (*Porul*)—the meaning and purpose—of the idea of Ashram. In essence, it is the *siramam* of everyone's personal faith tethered to the most astounding fact of history—Jesus as an *Asiramavaathi*, the singular exemplar. Christian Ashram Movement is an attempt to promote Christ-centred awareness of one's *siramam*. It would make a difference in one's life being meaningful to oneself and to others that one relates to.



The above insights have come together in my reflections on personal experience in the CK Ashram tradition, others' writing on ashrams, Tamil theistic tradition and Thomesian impact as evidenced in Tamil literature. The insights shared are to bring to your awareness (*sinthanai, ninaivu*) of the *a-siramam* tradition. If theologians have reflected on the coincidences, it needs to be made known loudly to our people and to the Christian world. There is more in the *asiramam* tradition to be a Christian Tamil, Christian Indian or just an Indian than meets the eye. There is need for greater research on indianisation of Christianity, including its ashram tradition in the current socio-cultural and political milieu in India.

The appropriateness of this critique to the deplorable crisis of the Church of South India should be apparent. It would need more than a piece of writing. To chew the present one would do for the moment. To conclude: there is the need for greater research on indianisation of Christianity, including its ashram tradition, and there is urgency in the truthful retelling of the narrative of Indian culture itself.

### **An End Note Apologia**

The general notion that *ashrams* per se are Hindu ashrams is an issue in itself. It is important to note that to uncritically situate the idea of 'ashram' in the notion of Hinduism as a religion or Hindu spirituality without forthrightly addressing the Vedic intent behind them would risk foregoing informed intelligence. It is not relevant to our framework. To be historical in our near anti-historical "accept the given" culture is a necessity. Yet, it is charitable to embrace everyone as our people.

Louis Sundaramani Simon  
A compatriot in the *siramam*  
2 Kerry Lane, Hopkinton, MA 01748  
USA

December 13, 2015