



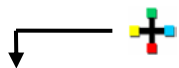
Gesta Dei per Tamulos (The Dispersion of the Tamil Church)

1962

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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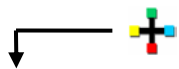


It was one of those moments of pure happiness which lighten the days even of an ecumenical bureaucrat. We were in the hills of Viti Levu-the main Island of the Fiji group. We were tramping up a muddy track with the aid of a hurricane lamp. I was with a small band of local Christians, and our guide was a young Tamil Christian who had been a schoolgirl in Madura and then offered for missionary service in Fiji. We were looking for a village where Tamil was the only language spoken, and there was no one to tell them about Jesus in a language they could speak. When we reached it, I found myself back again in a South Indian village. Everything was just as it always is-the petromax lamp, the *pandal* erected for the occasion, the garland and the tray of fruit, the flowery speech of welcome, and then the long rapt attention while the Gospel is preached to them in their own tongue. Hard to believe that it was all thousands of miles away from India, in the midst of the Pacific! Hard to believe, two hours later when I sat with the mud still on my shoes waiting for the Boeing 707 for San Francisco, that it was not all a pleasant dream!

Someone had to tell the story of *The Dispersion of the Tamil Church*,<sup>1</sup> and Bishop Sargant has done it well. He himself began to be interested by discovering-as so many others have done-groups of Tamil Christians in places where organized missions had never been. He followed up these first contacts by researches which have extended over more than twenty years, and the result is a fascinating and often moving series of stories that takes one over much of South East Asia, to Africa and-with less details-to the West Indies and the Fiji Islands. The Tamil Church, he says, 'did not send out saints and missionaries but shook out and scattered abroad its ordinary Christians'-and he takes us North, South, East and West to give us glimpses of what these ordinary Christians did.

He begins with his own Kannarese country, and introduces us to Tamil Christian sepoys, converts of the Tranquebar mission, serving in the armies of Haidar Ali a quarter-of-a-century before the first missionary reached that region; when they did finally come, 'it was the presence of the Tamil Christians ... which gave strong encouragement to the new missionaries to settle

down and begin their labours'. He introduces us to the Tamil 'Christian David' persuading the godless English commandant of Jaffna Fort to stop using the church as his private cattle shed,

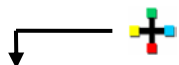


making it again into a true house of God, and in due course welcoming the first Methodist missionaries to the Island. He takes us eastwards to Burma and Malaya and thrills us with the story of Solomon Thumbuswamy who 'became a true apostle to the Nicobar Islands'. Five previous attempts had been made by Protestant and Roman Catholic Missions to evangelize the Nicobar Islands and all had failed. Solomon, in the modest role of 'meteorological observer', was to prove God's chosen instrument for accomplishing this task. And finally we are taken westwards-to Mauritius and South Africa to see how Tamil Christians were used in the service of the Gospel there. The story fittingly ends with Pilkington of Uganda whose spiritual rebirth-so decisive for the history of the Church in East Africa-was the result of reading the tract by 'Tamil David' called *Have you received the Baptism of the Holy Ghost?*

And of course there is far more: there is the story of Vedamanickam of Mayaladi, going as a devout Hindu to worship at Chidambaram, deflected from his intended plans by a dream, converted through the witness of a sister and the preaching of a missionary, trekking hundreds of miles to find a man to tell his people more of the Gospel and finally succeeding in bringing the great Ringeltaube to the field of his apostolic labours in the region of Cape Comorin. There is, of course, Bishop Azariah and the Tinnevely mission to Dornakal. And even such still flourishing and radio active particles of the Tamil 'fall-out' as D. T. Niles find a place in the story.

Anyone who has learned to know and love the Tamil people will rejoice that Bishop Sargant has devoted so much labour and care to the recovery of these forgotten stories-even if the most devoted may feel it wise to suspend judgment on the theory that Abraham's journey from Ur was the first stage in the Tamil dispersion. But the book has a much wider importance. The Tamils have certainly been given great privileges. It was among them that Christianity in its Western forms-both Catholic and Protestant-first took effective root in India. They have been given gifts of toughness, pertinacity and humour, which make them both enterprising emigrants and also loyal adherents to their own traditions. These factors have helped to bring it about that they have been-in so many places-the first representatives and witnesses of the Gospel. But surely it is not only of the Tamils that such an anthology could be made. When I was travelling in Africa two years ago I made it a point to enquire in places which I visited: 'Who was the very first to bring the Gospel to this area?' On many occasions I learned that it was some Africans from another part of the continent whose very names had almost been forgotten. The missionary whose name is remembered had-in many cases-come later and found African Christians already there to receive him.

It is a serious defect in our thinking about the mission of the Church



that our picture of the past has so little place in it for the stories which this book contains. We are beginning to be aware of the great need to 're-mint' the coinage of missions for our day, so that we cease to think and talk as though missions were essentially an affair organized by the churches of the West. Part of that re-minting must be a reinterpretation of the past. History, says E. H. Carr, is 'an unending dialogue between the present and the past.' We need to put some questions to the past about the things which are in our minds as we look to the future: what is to be the pattern of missions now that the supremacy of the Western races is ended? What is the place of the 'non-professional missionary' in the total witness of the Church? There are others besides the Tamils who can tell us that our picture of the past has been too much dominated by the great figures from

Europe and America; that in fact much of the advance of the 'great century' has been due to the workings of the Holy Spirit in the lives of almost forgotten men and women such as those who people this book. The writing of missionary history in the next few decades ought to take account of such as these, and should in turn provide searching questions about the mission of the Church in the future. What, for example, will be the verdict of the future on the vast dispersions of the churches which are going on today, the movements of migrant labour all over Europe, the movements of governmental, commercial, and technical missions to the developing countries, and the vast movement of tourists penetrating like a flood into every corner of the world? Will it be possible for a historian of the future to say that the dispersion of the West Indian churches in Britain provided the bridgeheads for a new missionary advance into the pagan areas of British industrial society? Or that the Western oil companies were the means by which the Gospel got into the heart of the Muslim world?

The reading of a book like this makes one cautious about using such a phrase as 'missionary strategy'. Like the Acts of the Apostles, these stories of the secret and unexpected workings of the Holy Spirit in the lives of men and women make one realize that the strategy is in His hands, that He works in unexpected ways, and that the Church is simply called upon to follow where He shows the way.

Bishop Sargant hopes that the publication of this second edition of his book will elicit information that may make it possible for him to bring out a third and still fuller collection of stories of the Tamil dispersion. But even the present edition deserves an early reprinting – which would, incidentally, provide an opportunity to correct the large number of errors and misprints. It is to be hoped that this story of the *Gesta Christi per Tamulos*<sup>2</sup> will move others to make similar researches among other peoples. This is the kind of reappraisal of the past which we need if we are to understand the future.

1. *The Dispersion of the Tamil Church*. N. C. Sargant. (Indian SPCK. Rs. 25. Can be obtained through SPCK, Marylebone Road, London, NW1.)
2. The Acts of Christ through the Tamils.

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