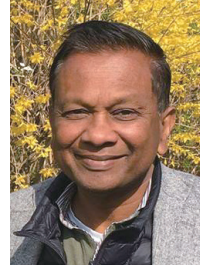


# Indian Jesuits in Japan



Author Mukesh Williams

By Mukesh Williams

Around 600 years ago, some Indian Jesuits came to Japan to proselytize and trade, but over the centuries they reinvented themselves as promoters of education and culture. This shift is rooted in history and the drama of the political and social life of Japan. Their personal discipline, social work, and sound scholarship have earned them a praiseworthy place in Japanese society. The Indian Jesuits, like many others, were attracted to Japan by the desire to spread their philosophy, help the people of Japan, or learn about Japanese culture. There were never very many Indian Jesuits in Japan, but their impact was felt in the spread of Christian thought, Indian philosophy, humanistic education, and the Indian way of life. The Indian Jesuits came on the heels of Buddhist monk Bodhisena Bharadwaj, who came from the Pindola clan in South India, at the invitation of Emperor Shomu, to open the eyes of the Buddha in the Todaiji Temple during the eighth century. His impact and influence on Japanese religious traditions have been profound.

The Indian Jesuits understood the long history of connections with Buddhist and Hindu traditions, and used it to their advantage. India and Japan have not been antagonistic towards each other. Even during World War II, except for skirmishes with the Indian National Army, prominent Indian figures like Subhash Chandra Bose, Rash Behari Bose, Radhabinod Pal, and Mohammad Barkatullah Bhopali, were treated with reverence in Japan. For most Indian Jesuits who came to Japan in the latter half of the 20th century, the technique of Japanese movies and the aesthetics of literature were a great attraction. This was a time in India when young men wanted to go to Europe and America, but those who wanted to go to Japan were seen as somewhat different. India was still a third-world country, and the attraction of the first world was profound in Indian society. Though Japan was modernized, it did not have the same kind of attraction in the Indian imagination as countries in the Anglo-American world. The Japanese language posed a formidable barrier, unlike English, which most Indians were familiar with. Since the time of Francis Xavier, the Jesuit community has struggled to master the Japanese language. Most Jesuits residing in Japan continue to grapple with the kanji and grammar of the language. However, the Jesuits carried with them an indomitable spirit of service to God and men and overcame many of the difficulties of communication in an alien language. They set up educational and religious institutions in Japan, and used them as their base to promote their values and ideas. Some of their educational institutions have stood the test of time and have become the foremost in the field of Japanese education. The Indian

Jesuits used these institutions as a base to understand Japan and, in turn, contribute to its development. Over the centuries, most of the Indian Jesuits came to love Japan, especially its people.

## Franciscan Mendicant from Maharashtra

The early Indian pioneers in Japan were not Jesuits but Franciscan friars. The Franciscan mendicants held no property but wandered from place to place, begging and helping the poor and sick. The Jesuits were mostly Roman Catholic priests, and they were called the Society of Jesus. One such Franciscan mendicant was Gonsalo Garcia (1556-1597). He was part of the Franciscan order, born in Bassein or Vasai in Maharashtra. Bassein became a Portuguese town located about 48 kilometers from Bombay. Its pleasant climate and excellent timber quality made it a center of the shipbuilding industry, making the city a commercial center and choice location for Portuguese noblemen. Gonsalo was a mestizo, born of an Indian mother and European father. This gave him certain advantages. He studied in a Jesuit school and met a Jesuit priest, Sebastiao Gonsalves, who became his lifelong friend and mentor. Gonsalo studied grammar and philosophy and came to Japan to spread his ideas. By this time, he entered into business and became rich. His proficiency with the Japanese language and his benign nature attracted many young men, including the Japanese nobility. But during this time the hostility of Japanese authorities against the Christians was on the increase. Although he made Japan his home, he was martyred in 1597 along with other fellow Christians. He was one of the 26 martyrs of Japan and was canonized along with others.

## Indian Jesuit Cyril Veliath

The life of my friend Prof. Cyril Veliath exemplifies some of the general statements made in the first paragraph. Prof. Veliath was keen to come to Japan in the early 1970s. Fired by his interest in the workings of raw human emotions, the technological prowess of Japanese movies and the delicate aesthetics of Japanese literature, Prof. Veliath's passion to go to Japan grew year by year. "Since my childhood days I used to read novels by Japanese authors and see movies by Japanese directors, and in this way, I developed a love for the nation and its people," he says. "A movie that impressed me greatly was *Rashomon*, by the great Japanese director Kurosawa Akira."

Photo: Author



Prof. Cyril Veliath (left) and author

Photo: Author



Sophia University campus

The Jesuits are divided into “different provinces” depending on the “places” in India where they worked. Prof. Veliath belonged to the Karnataka Province, which was comprised of areas including Bangalore and Mangalore. Each of these provincial areas was led by a Jesuit who was the “Provincial Superior” but his own superior would not let him go. He said there was lot of work to be done in India. Prof. Veliath explains: “When I came to know that Jesuits were needed in Japan, I approached my Provincial Superior and requested his permission to go to Japan. He was unwilling, however, to let me go, because he felt there was also plenty of work to be done in Karnataka. Nevertheless, after a great deal of discussion and debate, the Superior General, Fr. Pedro Arrupe, who was chief of all the Jesuits in the world, wrote a personal letter to the Karnataka Provincial Superior and requested him to send me to Japan.” Through the encouragement of the Jesuit head office, Prof. Veliath was released from his commitment in India and allowed to proceed to Japan. As a young man, he felt that his life’s mission lay in Japan. He was well aware of the Jesuits bringing Christianity to Japan, the subsequent persecution of the Jesuits and the incomplete mission of the founding fathers, but it was his love for Japan that brought him to the country.

### Indian Philosophy & Indian Jesuits in Japan

Half a century ago many Indians in Japan were understood to be highly intelligent and proficient in the ancient Indian classics and philosophy. They were seen as coming from the land of “the Buddha, Mahavira, and Yajnavalkya”. These great men and their philosophies introduced in Japan brought adulation to learned Indians. But Prof. Veliath said his work in Japan was not to reintroduce the great men

mentioned above, but to help young Japanese become acquainted with persons like Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and Rabindranath Tagore, who introduced Indian spirituality to the West.

Most Japanese saw Jesuit priests coming from India as Hindus. India was visualized as a Hindu country, and Christians coming from India was unimaginable. In fact, Christianity was seen as a kind of Hinduism, as it came to Japan from India. Indian Jesuits were keenly involved in the education process of students in Japan. They conducted courses, symposiums, conferences, and exchange programs with Indian institutions, often taking students to give them a first-hand experience. Prof. Veliath elaborates that most Indian Jesuits taught “courses related to Indian culture”, and Japanese students inquisitive to know about India eagerly attended these courses. After attending these courses and exchange programs, their understanding of Indian culture and philosophy deepened.

In order to teach Indian philosophy, many Indian Jesuits returned to India to acquire training in the subject. Prof. Veliath was no exception. The Jesuits at Sophia University insisted that he acquire training in Indian philosophy and religion. So in the late 1970s he went to Pune, India, and earned master’s and doctoral degrees in Indian philosophy. He was asked many questions about the *Upanishads*, *Mahabharata*, and *Ramayana*, which motivated him to return to India and earn a doctorate in Indian philosophy. This new academic skill gave him an entry into the academic world. He began teaching part-time at Sophia University, and soon became a regular faculty member and professor of global studies. After serving for over four decades, he continues to work as a professor emeritus, still finding mastery of the Japanese language a constant struggle.



Photo: Author



Morning near Library

### Veliath's Novel *The Love Song*

During his lectures at Sophia University, Prof. Veliath realized that his students were keen to study the great epic poem *Mahabharata* and conduct an inter-religious inquiry. The story of raw human emotions, motives, indulgences, and pleasures in the classic epic appealed to Japanese students. The characters in the *Mahabharata*, desiring to do what was right and find an infallible truth, intrigued the students. But as Prof. Veliath searched for a good translation in English, he could not find one. In the end, he wrote his own book in the form of a novel in English, calling it *The Love Song*. The book was therefore written not for scholars but for his “non-Indian” students, to understand the moral fabric of ancient Hindu society. The novel was published by Minerva Press in London in 1997 and received many good reviews. Prof. Veliath writes with both passion and scholarship, bringing out the essence of human motives and human dilemmas. The *Bhagavad-Gita* finds a significant place in *The Love Song*, and is placed at the end to mark its significance. At one point, Lord Krishna tells Arjuna, “In whatever way people may choose to love me, in that same way they encounter my love. Though the paths of men may be many, they all, in the end, come to me.” The book reveals that a dialogue amongst cultures is possible when there is open-mindedness and love for each other. The ability of the Jesuits to cross religious boundaries at ease and learn from parallel traditions is commendable.

His returning to India often was not just to learn and develop understanding, but also to meet old friends, walk childhood roads, return to a hometown, meet relatives, and above all, eat Indian

cuisine. Prof. Veliath is fond of South Indian food, and especially the dosa, and he loves to explore places where good food is available in Tokyo. Walking the roads of Tokyo, he has observed the changes that have come in Indian society in Japan since 50 years ago, when he first came to Japan. The nation has become more international, more multilingual. The fear of foreigners is less. Multiracial marriages are on the increase, and there is more acceptance of children from mixed marriages. “All this bodes very well for Japan,” he says. “I am sure the nation has a big role to play in the future. However, I am also worried that this material success may impair the spirituality of the nation and its people.”

### Global Atmosphere of Sophia University

The atmosphere at Sophia University was quite global with Jesuits from Europe, Australia, the United States, and Latin America. The conversations and debates that ensued were quite an education for Prof. Veliath. There were often “dissents, mix-ups, and differences of opinions. Yet, all these hitches were generally solved by patience and good humor.” He noticed that the Anglo-European members were quite forthcoming in expressing their opinions and quick to disagree, whereas the Japanese were “polite, caring, and orderly”. On the surface they seemed “a bit cold and aloof”, but this was more to do with their inability to speak foreign languages and not knowing how to deal with them. By and large the Japanese have deep respect for the erudition of Jesuit priests. Prof. Veliath confessed that rather than being a victim of “any form of bigotry or racism”, he has received “a great deal of love, respect, and acceptance”. The Japanese do not differentiate on the basis of nationality, but see Indian Jesuit priests as “priests and professors”. It is not that an average Japanese does not know the role Jesuits like Francis Xavier

Photo: Author



Kulturheim Chapel

or Valignano played during the Christian persecution, but today there is only “respect and love”. At Sophia University itself many Indian Jesuits work, who are both excellent individuals and scholars. There are many who also work at other Jesuit institutions in Japan.

## Ignatian Education

The Jesuit priests have founded many academic institutions, such as Rokko Gakuin and Eiko Gakuin, but among them Sophia University stands out as unique. Founded in 1913, it is a subtle blend of European and Japanese cultures. The S. J. House, the crosses, churches, and maple in the fall and cherry in the spring make the place unique. Based on the principles of Jesuit Ignatian education, Sophia University follows the motto “For Others with Others”. It believes in the diversity of religion and culture that bring the world together through dialogue. Sophia University has become a world-class university, fostering capable men and women. Sophia allows its students to develop their talents to “benefit others”, thereby leading to their “personal growth”. It is possible to see this belief reflected in their dining halls, cafeterias, and classrooms. Sophia University has a great history of alleviating the pain of others. After World War II, when Japan was suffering from the atomic fallout on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Superior General of the Jesuits, Father Pedro Arrupe, appealed to Jesuits all over the world to come and work in Japan, “because the nation was in dire need of help”, said Prof. Veliath. The appeal brought in a Jesuit from India in 1973, and then two more in 1974. Prof. Veliath was the “second Indian Jesuit who came to work in Japan on a permanent basis.” Though he may not be a medieval pioneer like Gonsalo Garcia, he is a modern pioneer of Christian humanism. There are many aspects of Japanese culture that he has learned during his long stay in Japan that have also helped him to transform the worldview of young Japanese through his teaching.

There are many values that the Indian Jesuits have recognized in Japanese culture that are like theirs. This helps them conduct cross-cultural dialogue. Firstly, the honest politeness of the Japanese is quite similar to theirs, and secondly, the Japanese sense of discipline in the workplace matches theirs. Prof. Veliath believes that if both of these qualities can permeate Indian society, they will buttress the innate intelligence of Indians and give them a cutting-edge advantage in a global workplace.

The Indian Jesuits who came to Japan over the centuries were highly intelligent, well-educated, and possessed of an inquisitive mind. They were quick to comprehend cultural differences and understand religious texts through reading and translation. They came to Japan to help its people and know their cultural traditions. Their love for Japan and its people was sincere and profound. They created schools and colleges to instruct the young and learn from them. The inter-religious environment they created allowed subsequent Jesuits to enter Japan and strengthen it further.

Photo: Author



Leaf-strewn path to the Library

## Dialogue Key to Inter-Religious Amity

An honest dialogue where each group can understand the other is the key to global peace. Like so many Jesuits, Prof. Veliath is constantly finding ways to conduct inter-religious dialogue. His recent edited book called *The Wheel and the Cross: An Anthology by Jesuits and Friends on Buddhism and Dialogue* was published in Manila in 2021. In his introduction to the book, he writes, “The primary motive behind our publication was to fortify ties of amity and fellowship among Buddhist and Christian intellectuals and enthuse our Christian youth into displaying a keener interest in Buddhism. It is my hope that in years to come, more and more of our youth feel drawn towards extending signs of goodwill and harmony towards their non-Christian brethren. I conclude by expressing my sincere appreciation to everyone who in any way assisted us in this crucial undertaking.” Prof. Veliath believes that developing “goodwill and harmony” are the true “signs” of creating a better world. His example shows how the Indian Jesuits in Japan have laid the foundation of amity between the peoples of India and Japan. The Indian Jesuits have represented a composite Indian culture based on Christian humanism, where love and understanding play a vital role. **JS**

Mukesh Williams is a professor of Soka University and former Faculty member of Keio University. He is a university educator, media writer and poet. He has taught modern literatures, media studies and cultural history in Japan and India. He is presently distinguished professor at Shoolini University, advisor to the South Asia Research Center, Soka University and the Global Core Committee Member Alumni Association, St. Stephen's College. He has conducted seminars on global cultures and counseled Japanese universities on academic exchange and PR strategies.