



TANGASSERI: A HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL STUDY OF AN ANGLO-INDIAN COASTAL SETTLEMENT IN KERALA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Tangasseri, a narrow coastal stretch near Kollam in Kerala, represents a unique confluence of colonial legacy, maritime significance, and Anglo-Indian cultural heritage. This paper explores the historical evolution of Tangasseri from a colonial enclave under Portuguese, Dutch, and British influence to a post-independence multicultural settlement. It highlights the role of institutions such as educational establishments, the Gandhi Seva Sangam, and the All-India Anglo-Indian Association in shaping the socio-cultural and economic life of the region. The study also examines the large-scale migration of the Anglo-Indian community after independence and its impact on the demographic and cultural landscape of Tangasseri. Through an analysis of its landmarks, institutions, and community life, the paper argues that Tangasseri stands as a living testimony to Kerala's pluralistic traditions and colonial past.

Keywords: *Tangasseri, Anglo-Indian Community, Colonial Heritage, Gandhi Seva Sangam, Education in Kerala, Coastal Settlements, Migration*

Introduction

Tangasseri is a narrow strip of land extending into the Arabian Sea, covering approximately 99 acres. The climate here is humid, accompanied by a gentle sea breeze, and coconut palms grow abundantly throughout the area. The population of this territory is about two thousand, of which nearly one thousand belong to the Anglo-Indian community, while the native people living along the coastal areas are mostly fishermen. One of the prominent tourist attractions is the lighthouse, which is about 325 feet tall and is the second tallest in India. Geographically, Tangasseri provides a natural harbour for the Quilon coast. With the opening of Kollam Port, Tangasseri has come to occupy a significant place on the commercial and strategic map of India.

Another notable site is Fort Thomas, a reminder of the Portuguese invasion; however, the structure now lies in ruins. In the heart of Tangasseri, one can find two important landmarks: Mount Carmel Anglo-Indian Girls' School, established in 1885 and upgraded to a high school in 1914, and the Infant Jesus Anglo-Indian Boys' High School, established in 1940. Both institutions have long been centres of quality English education and have contributed significantly to the educational development of the region. Gandhi Seva Sangam, established in 1948 following the death of Mahatma Gandhi, is another important landmark of post-Independence Tangasseri. It is a service-oriented organization that functions as a library and reading room for the local community. The Bishop's House, formerly the residence of the Portuguese Governor, is now the residence of the Bishop of Quilon. It is located amidst spacious palm groves. The carriage used by the revered Bishop Benziger is preserved here. According to tradition, St. Thomas the Apostle visited Tangasseri in 52 A.D. to establish Christianity. Later, Bishop Benziger played a significant role in strengthening the Church in this region.

A Portuguese-style church was built in 1789, which later became the cathedral of the diocese. It was subsequently rebuilt and inaugurated on 3 December 2005. The Holy Cross Church, originally built in 1841, has also been reconstructed and continues to serve as an important centre of worship and devotion. Most of the population in Tangasseri is Christian.

Today, people from Muslim and Hindu communities also reside here and contribute to the educational and cultural life of the area. The Buckingham Canal, which connects the inland waterways to the Arabian Sea and was once notorious for acts of robbery, can still be seen behind the Mount Carmel Convent.

The Tangasseri Beach is protected by a seawall constructed to prevent coastal erosion. The Achukuddom printing press was established here by the Portuguese. Entry into this historic region from Kollam is marked by the Tangasseri Arch, which holds a unique place in history. Before Independence, Tangasseri was a separate territory under British control. During the period

known as the Tangasseri Question, the Anglo-Indians, with the support of local people, constructed this arch. It served as a checkpoint of the Travancore government to monitor vehicles entering the region.

Analysis and Interpretations

Tangasseri in the post-independence years witnessed an uncertainty among a large section of the community as to their future in a free India. Along with uncertainty economic factor was also there behind this exodus. In search of better prospects, they migrated in large numbers to countries like UK, Australia, America and Canada. Instead Tangasseri had seen an influx of people who had migrated there in large numbers over the last few decades. Now they form the bulk of the population and usually benefit from the culture and education of the place.

East West Club

In the late fifties the Anglo-Indians prided themselves in an institution of their own making the East West Club. The club was situated in a picturesque cottage by the sea at Tangasseri's West end. The persons behind the founding of the Club were E. Edwards, A.J Declase, Dan Gonzago, Archibald Fernandez and others. But after the demise of Edward, the activities of the club came to an end. During its existence, it was the venue for several remarkable events. It provided a forum in which the young Anglo-Indians could come together and make merry. ¹ It acted as a centre of cultural activities and increasing social contacts among the Anglo-Indian Community.

Gandhi Seva Sangam

The Anglo-Indians were in the forefront of all social and economic activities of Tangasseri. The establishment of a service organisation in the name of Mahatama Gandhi proved to be landmark in the history of Tangasseri. The Gandhi Seva Sangam was established on 10th August 1942.¹ It was the Anglo-Indians who felt the need for the establishment of such a regional organization for the well-being of the people of Tangasseri. And in their efforts to set up such a service-based organization the other Tangasserians also joined their hands and rendered full hearted support. It thus acted as a centre of communal harmony. Frankpet Fernandez was the founder president of the Sangam. The Library and Reading room associated with this Sangam were inaugurated by Raphael J Rodriguez, Member of Legislative Assembly, on November 21st, 1949, in a meeting held under the chairmanship of C. Kesavan, the State Congress President.²

During this period the Honorable Minister for Education, Madhava Menon visited Gandhi Seva Sangam. Impressed by the warm welcome given by the Tangasserians and the variety of the entertainments displayed before him by the students at the Anglo-Indians School, he offered the salt depot at Tangasseri, as an office, library and reading room for the sangam.³ One can see from the official records of the Sangam that almost all the social, political, cultural educational and public works of Tangasseri during the fifties were conducted through the Sangam. It was this Sangam, which was ably handled by the eminent people that represented the pulse of the Tangasserians both in the Madras and Travancore Cochin governments.

It seems ironic that Tangasseri did not get electricity until a year after independence, though the neighbouring Quilon had electricity for years. It was due to the strained relations that existed between the Travancore State and Tangasseri on the Tangasseri question.⁴ Here again Gandhi Seva Sangam under the enterprising Anglo-Indian took the initiative. Till January 1950 Tangasseri was a part of Madras State. After the establishment of the Sangam the eminent office bearers of mostly composed of the Anglo-Indians sent resolutions to Travancore Government for the approval of the setting up of Electric posts at Tangasseri.⁵ But the Travancore Government made excuses for the same.⁵ When their resolutions failed to achieve any positive results from the Travancore government the Anglo-Indians submitted a Memorandum to the Madras Government. And without any delay the Madras government granted power supply to Tangasseri.⁶

After receiving the confirmation letter from the Madras Government, the Sangam representatives again approached Travancore authorities and sought an audience with M. Bakthavalsalam, then the Minister for Public Works. In that meeting the representatives explained the situation at Tangasseri and the Minister was incensed and thereby took immediate steps for granting electric supply to Tangasseri. ⁷ So it can be considered as one of the greatest achievements of Gandhi Seva Sangam.

Again, when the Second Five Year Plan included the provisions for the extension of the Railway line from Quilon to Tangasseri and also the opening of a canal link from Ashtamudi to Tangasseri the Anglo-Indians opposed the Schemes. ⁸ The people in this area feared that their belongings, lands and villas would be destroyed for the project. So, they sent resolutions to the Government for the cancel of the project. It is said that on this matter there was difference of opinions between the Anglo-Indians and the local people. The fishermen community in this area desired the prosecution of these projects and to some extent this issue strained the cordial relations of the Anglo-Indians and the fishermen community. ⁹ Later, on the ground of opposition of some sections of people in this area and due to some other reasons, the Government dropped these projects.

Though in fifties the Sangam was dominated by the Anglo-Indians, they had done programmes beneficial to the whole Tangasserians. Through the Sangam they had sent representations to Travancore government on the anomalies about fees, Syllabus and curriculum of the Anglo-Indian Schools.¹⁰ Through petitions to Municipal commissioner they also got repaired the roads in Tangasseri especially those used by the Anglo-Indians who are the shoe wearing people of the ward.¹¹

In the Library, books were well maintained and the reading room was opened free for all irrespective of community. Film shows, Dramas and Dance programmer were conducted for the amusement of the people. Film shows on publically important matters like Five-year plans were also conducted. Adult Education classes were also carried out successfully through the Sangam. Under

the auspices of the Sangam a Vanitha Samajam was inaugurated by Indira Gandhi on September 30th, 1955, during her visit to Kollam. A grand welcome was given to her on the occasion by the Tangasserians.¹²

Records show that there had been active participation of the Anglo Indians in the Sangam's work upto 1960. After that it began to decrease and it came almost to an end by the year 1975. Since then, the Sangam's activities have been fully owned and controlled by the local people. Over the years, it had served as a radio room and later as a TV room with the task of disseminating information to Tangasseri. To this day Sangam remains a silent yet effective agent of change in Tangasseri,

Educational Institutions

Tangasseri plays a pioneering role in the field of education. Now for over a century it has been recognized as a centre for quality education. Tangasseri's earliest educational institutions were integrally linked with the churches in this settlement. On the evidence of Logan, that the propaganda Mission Started an English and a Vernacular school at Tangasseri in 1840.¹³ It consisted of double roofed thatched buildings of limited space on either side of the yard in front of the Pro-Cathedral, in the late nineteenth century, they constituted centers of learning "where the alphabets, and the rudiments of writing, readings and arithmetic in English and Malayalam were taught to a pack of boys huddled together the bigger ones on shaky benches and the smaller ones on the ground."¹⁴ In those days several girls were also taught English and needle work and a little arithmetic in private homes.¹⁵ Forty five years later, in 1885, the first Convent School for girls was formally opened by the Bishop of Quilon, Dr. Ferdinand Ossi.¹⁶ "This nucleus of female education was situated in a small bungalow near the beach" which came to be known as the Mount Carmel Anglo Indian Girls School and it became a High School in the year 1914.¹⁷

The year 1940 saw the founding of another major educational institution in this small settlement. Until then Tangasseri boys who wanted a quality education had to go out of Tangasseri to the Schools in Travancore. St.Aloysius Boys High School was one such school in Travancore State where the Tangasseri boys had their education. It was established in the years 1896 by Quilon Bishop Ferdinand Ossi.¹⁸

There upon the Infant Jesus Anglo-Indian Boys School was established in 1940 at Tangasseri by Bishop Jerome. M. Fernandez, chiefly for the Anglo-Indian students of the locality. It initially started with fifteen students in standard I & II and two members as the staff.¹⁹ Today it is having a total strength of nearly two thousand pupils and seventy dedicated staff members.

Mary Netto was the first Head Mistress of the school. It was first governed by the Code of Regulations for Anglo-Indian schools, Madras, and the students were coached for the Madras Anglo-Indian Examinations. In 1965 the ISC (Indian School Certificate) Examination was also introduced. This Examination proved beneficial to parents who were residing abroad for higher Academic studies.

In 1969, the school implemented the ICSE (Indian Certificate of Secondary Education) syllabus and the first batch of students appeared in 1971 produced hundred percentage results. In 1973 the Madras Anglo-Indian Examination was discontinued here and the school catered only for the ICSE Examination which continues. From the Academic year 1989-90, the plus two had commenced and is affiliated to the ISC Council.²⁰

The Mount Carmel Anglo-Indian Girls High School is also affiliated to the ISC council, and this school is also having Plus Two course. At present Sr. Angel Thomas is acting as the Principal of this Institution. Rev. Mother Mary Francis is the Manager of this Girls' school. It had its Centenary celebrations in 1985. The Infant Jesus School had also celebrated its Golden Jubilee in the year 1990. Rev. Sr. Estelle Vaz is acting as the principal of this institution. Bishop Stanly Roman is the manager of this school.

Though these two schools are still essentially Anglo-Indian schools, they accommodate all students irrespective of caste and creed. In the earlier days in these institutions teachers belonged to the Anglo Indian community were employed. But nowadays qualified and dedicated teachers from other communities are also working here along with the Anglo-Indians.

In the context of the education, both these schools have been contributing immensely to the education and betterment of students from all over Kerala, These schools offer an all-round personality development to the responsive student, and harmonizes with the most modern philosophy of Education, The approved academic curriculum, rich in content, methodology of teaching and mode of assessment provides an intellectual approach for each student's potential and awareness. The academic discipline is enriched by exploring in extracurricular activities, arts and Dramatic, Publications, Athletic, Sports and Games, Guidance and Counseling Music, Speech Training, NCC (Air Wing), Computer Science and the Lingua phone classes. Education through Audio Visual Aids, the Television systems and computers are part of the syllabus during class hours in these institutions. The Boarding Houses adds facilities for serious learning, moral formation and a total personality image.

Tangasseri's culture and fame is believed to have increased in the twentieth century after the name of these schools. In the words of Joseph Labrooy, an old Tangasserian, "with the settling up of these schools especially the boys school, areas such as the Post and Telegraphs, railways etc opened up to men of Tangasseri."²¹

The All-India Anglo-Indian Association

Essentially an Anglo-Indian settlement and as a territorial group the Anglo-Indians of Tangasseri had joined their hands in the Anglo-Indian and Domiciled European Association from the very beginning. In fact it was the first Anglo-Indian organization. Founded on December 16th, 1876, at Calcutta, it was inaugurated by the Honourable Sir. Richard Temple K.C.S.I, Lieutenant, Government of Bengal, in the Town of Calcutta.²²

In 1935, the Association came to be called The All-India Anglo-Indian Domiciled European Association. Until 1942, the head office of the Association was in Calcutta. But after the death of Sir Henry Gidney in 1942 and when Frank Anthony became its President in chief, its head office was shifted from Calcutta to Delhi.

Though Tangasseri was listed as a branch of the Association from an early period, its activities were in name only. It was the case of most of the other branches also. Frank Anthony states that it was mainly because of the indifferent attitude followed by the better placed members of the community. They thought that they did not require the assistance of the Association.²³

However, the tireless efforts of Frank Anthony could infuse a new life into branches, making the Association more alive. While the Association at the centre was busy with its legal battles to win for the community's special recognition in the Constitution of Independent India with minority safeguards, especially about the community's educational interests and job reservations, the activities of the branches were mainly confined to their respective territories.

The Tangasseri branch had its own poor fund and Education fund, although today massive educational assistance are providing by the Education Society at the centre. Every year the branch has been providing Scholarships for the poor and brilliant Anglo-Indian students at Tangasseri. For this the Central office New Delhi yearly sanctions Rs.50,000 for around ninety students of Tangasseri branch. These scholarships are awarded from the UKG level onwards. Students of Postgraduation and other professional courses also get the benefits of these scholarships.²⁵

On the recommendation of the Association several Anglo-Indian students, studying at the Mount Carmel Anglo-Indian Girls High School and Infant Jesus Anglo-Indian Boys High School, enjoying fee concessions. In the past the branch along with the members of Gandhi Seva Sangam had sent resolutions to the Travancore Government on the anomalies with regard to fees, Syllabus & Curriculum of these schools at Tangasseri. The Association and its members have also contributed their own share in attaining a good will for these institutions, all over Kerala.

The Association had its Centenary year celebration in the year 1976. The Tangasseri branch celebrated the Centenary year mainly by instituting a permanent scholarship in the two Anglo-Indian Schools to be given each year to a deserving poor Anglo-Indian child, and by conducting social and cultural activities, especially to provide for the older folk a gay and happy time. On the Centenary Day December 16th, 1976, a mass was held at the Infant Jesus Pro Cathedral and cultural programmes were conducted at the evening. In association with the celebration a Thanksgiving service was conducted on February 5th, 1977 at Mount Carmel Anglo-Indian Girls High School. The meeting was inaugurated by Baby John, Honourable Minister for Revenue and other prominent persons had also spoken on the occasion. In New Delhi the President of India attended the commemoration service.²⁶

Frank Anthony's Birthday is normally celebrated at Tangasseri by conducting the Annual General Meeting of the branch. Usually, it will be in the month of September.²⁷ Almost all the members take part on the occasion in an atmosphere of fun, laughter and gaiety, during which cake, wine, dinner and soft drinks are being served. Infant Jesus School ground provides the stage for their gatherings. But former it was conducted at some of their mighty villas.

On the occasions like Christmas and New Year they gather together under the banner of the Association and celebrate it with much pomp and splendor. Every year on 23rd December they gather at Infant Jesus School ground and decorate a Christmas tree for the children. It is celebrated with various items of games followed by a tea party and Santa Claus giving away the gifts. On the twenty fifth night they have their grand Christmas Celebrations.²⁸

Thus, this branch provides opportunities for the Anglo-Indians for merry making and fun which are the integral parts of their life. It is this Association that provides a life Line and new hope for the remaining Anglo-Indians at Tangasseri, after their major exodus.

Conclusion

Today there are only few Anglo-Indian families at Tangasseri numbering fifty. Most of them have been migrated to different corners of the world for better prospects and the remaining families live in the old European model houses at the western end of Tangasseri. Earlier there were many Portuguese and Dutch model Houses in the place which have given way to concrete houses buildings. The few that remain have their original plaster decayed and peeled off exposing the core of the bricks and present a sad picture. Among this the 'Curzon Cottage' where Lord Curzon was said to have stayed during his brief visit can also see. All these existing old but beautiful and spacious houses stand testimony to a culture and society that had almost faded out.

People of Tangasseri today are both the parishioners of Holy Cross Church and Infant Jesus cathedral. In the past they played a very active role in the administration of the church activities, which formed the crux of local social life too. But as their number had been reduced their participation in the church activities have also lowered.²⁹ Now they gather for various Catholic rites in the church along with other believers who form the major sections of the population at Tangasseri. In 1964 two members of the Anglo-Indian community namely Clarence D' Cruz and Frankpet Fernandez took the major initiative in building fourteen stations of the Cross spreading over fourteen comers of the settlement.³⁰ Through this act of piety they hoped that Tangasseri would be installed in the minds of posterity as a bastion of the Catholic faith.

About dress, the Anglo-Indians of Tangasseri still wear old fashioned European style of dresses. It can be seen mostly among the older sections of people. The younger generation uses both western and Indian dress like Salwar kameez, Sari and blouse.

As regards their food habits they follow Kerala and European style. Kerala's rice and coconut-based dishes, the neo-Portuguese "kuseed" - a clear fish stew spiced with ginger, the English brown stews and caramel custards have been eternal favourites in the Anglo-Indian homes at Tangasseri. Other distinct delicacies include roast beef with potatoes and the mildly spicy beef pepper fry. Prominent sweet items found among them are the white halwa and 'matrimony' a cashew based sweet. A breakfast dish called 'Tangy' forms the Sunday breakfast of almost all the Anglo-Indian homes at Tangasseri.³¹

Thus, analyzing the present condition, it can be seen that a major exodus of the Anglo-Indians in the past independence period, and the large-scale influx of other people over the last few decades into Tangasseri, have resulted in the dissolution of this community. Today the single walled Fort Thomas, the two defaced cemeteries the Dutch and the English, the mighty Light House³² and the old-fashioned picturesque villas pays silent tribute to Tangasseri's multichequered history. Along with that the Anglo-Indian community at Tangasseri itself stands as a living testimony to its rich heritage.

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Notes:

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³¹ Personal Interview with Mrs. Rhoda Fernandez,

³² It was constructed in the year 1902, to warn the passing ships about the notorious Tangasseri reefs.

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