

SISTER ALEYAMMA VARGHESE SIHORA ASHRAM



1916-2003

LIFE STORY OF SISTER ALEYAMMA VARGHESE
MALIYEKKAL – PATHANAPURAM
14 Feb -1916 - 31 Oct 2003
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Layout by JJN
Nalloor Publications

This is the story of an ordinary Central Travancore woman who did great things for the Lord in Sihora Taluk (Jabalpur Dist.) in Madhya Pradesh. She was born in Maramon, the cradle of the reformation movement in the Mar Thoma Church. Through the great revival meetings held in 1930s she came to know the Lord and accepted Him as her personal Saviour. Later she joined the Sihora Ashram and worked there for 52 long years.

Sihora in Madhya Pradesh

Before independence in 1947 from the British rule, India was divided into more than 600 kingdoms, provinces, and territories. Some of the areas were ruled directly by the Britishers and the other areas were ruled by the local Rajas / Kings / Nawabs etc under British supervision. Sihora town (head quarters of a Taluk) was in the Central Province (C.P) of the British Raj which later became part of the present Madhya Pradesh state in 1956.

Many consider Sihora as the centre point (Middle Point) of India (but Jabalpur and Nagpur also claim to be the centre points). Sihora is about 40km away from Jabalpur town. There are 950 villages in the Sihora Taluk. This area was one of the most under developed parts of India. Out of the 355,000 population - 80% are Hindus and 19% Muslims and remaining 1% includes Jains, Sikhs, and Christians. Even now there are many villages without roads, schools, electricity and communication systems (telephones or Post office). Low caste people are denied all the privileges provided by the Government and social service agencies. Untouchability, Landlord system, Child marriages are still prevalent in many parts of this taluk. Many villagers are addicted to alcohol and drugs. They do not believe in modern medical care, but only in mantras and witchcraft. For them sickness is a curse from the demons.

Hindus are divided into four main groups or castes. They are Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. Each caste has a traditional occupation such as priest, warrior, merchant or farmer. Each caste has its own rules and behaviour. There is another group called Untouchables outside the four main groups and they are treated as the lowest group below Sudras. They are supposed to do all menial jobs in the society. About 20% of the Indian population comes under this group. Mahatma Gandhi called them Harijans. Even today these untouchables are not allowed to enter certain temples and prevented from drawing water from public wells.

In 1943, the only medical facility available in the area was the medical clinic run by our Mar Thoma Ashram. In 1951, literacy in Sihora was only 18.3%. In 2004 the rate stands at 64.8 %.

Beginning of the Sihora Ashram

Christa Panthi Ashram, Sihora was established in 1942 under the leadership of Rev. K. T. Thomas, Mr. John Varghese and Mr. M. P. Mathew, who later became ordained ministers of the Mar Thoma Church. Rev. Dr. C. E. Abraham-the Principal Emeritus of the Serampore College, West Bengal, was the person who motivated these youths to establish an Ashram in the then Central Province (C.P) of India. Rev. Abraham believed that it is the duty of the Indian churches to do the mission work in India. For that, many meetings of the theological students of the Serampore College were held in his residence in Serampore College Campus and finally his dreams were fulfilled through the establishment of the Ashram in 1942.

The Ashram community has two houses (for men and women) at two different places in the same town. They have adopted celibacy, asceticism and a monastic community model. This community was the only celibate missionary community of the Mar Thoma Church. Their motto is "THY WILL BE DONE". Sihora taluk was one of the remotest areas of Central India without any hospital or educational facilities.

Birth of Aleyamma Varghese

Aleyamma was born on 14 February, 1916, as the daughter of Geevarghese and Mariamma of the Maliyekkal family of the Maramon Mar Thoma Parish. Aleyamma accepted Jesus Christ as her personal saviour during the Revival

movement in the 1930s

(M. E. 1105). In 1936, Aleyamma's family shifted their residence to Pathanapuram. She was very active in church activities right from childhood. After her school education she joined the Sevika Sanghom Vanitha Mandiram in Tiruvalla for Bible study and Mission Training.

Vanitha Mandiram in Tiruvalla

Vanitha Mandiram is a training institute of women established in 1925, by the Mar Thoma Sevika Sanghom. Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionary, Miss. Kellaway from Australia was the Director/ Principal of this institute for many years. Miss. Kellaway's greatest attribute was her ability to inspire others to go for mission work. Many of our lady evangelists were her students.

Mar Thoma Convention in Pathanapuram

During one of the convention meetings held in Pathanapuram she had the privilege to listen to the messages of Rev. P. John Varghese (Palakkattachen). Rev. P. John Varughese (popularly known as Palakkattachen) was the founder of the first Ashram of the Mar Thoma Church in Palghat, in 1928. Like Bishop Abraham Mar Thoma, Palakkattachen also believed that the evangelization of India was the responsibility of every member of the church and not of the clergy alone. According to him every man and woman was called to be a witness to Jesus Christ irrespective of his / her secular occupation. He encouraged the women of the Church to take part in the evangelization of India. By hearing his messages she dedicated herself for mission work outside Travancore (Kerala).

Aleyamma's brother Chacko Varghese was already a member of the Sihora Ashram so she preferred to go to another place. But due to the advice of Palakkattachen she selected Sihora as her place of work. She reached Sihora on 21 October, 1951.

First Assignment

She started her Ashram work as a nursery teacher in a very remote village called *Elamala Pura* village near Sihora. Classes were conducted under a big Tamarind tree (there were no school buildings). Her students were from the poor families of the villages. They did not have proper clothing or hygienic habits. She was concerned about the health and hygiene of her students, and she used to carry soap, oil, towels and combs with her to give a bath to her students in the village pond. Like a mother she cared for them.

Medical Work

The arrival of Sister Chechamma Varkey in 1952 - the first trained nurse of the Ashram and also of Sihora Taluk - gave a renewed life to medical work of the Ashram. Sister Aleyamma was assigned to work with Sister Chechamma in the medical work. They both visited the villages around Sihora on horse cart (there was no other means of transportation) and attended the medical needs of the women and children. In the mornings they worked in the mission hospital and evenings they visited the village clinics. In 1967, the clinic was converted to a hospital with 20 beds, and Dr Sosamma Philip (Dr. Alexander Mar Thoma's sister) became the medical superintendent.

As a Social Worker

In addition to her hospital work, Sister Aleyamma was busy in conducting classes for the village children to teach them the three R's (reading, writing and arithmetic). She worked for the upliftment of the women in Sihora taluk. She assisted the local women in forming Mahila Samajams for their benefit. Sunday School classes were started in many villages with her initiation and support.

A Landscaping Expert!

Even though she had no formal training in gardening, when the residence was shifted from Sihora to Darsani in 1973, the barren Darsani compound was converted into a beautiful garden. She planted all sorts of fruit trees, flowers and other plants in the compound and took care of them. Even today the greenery at Sihora Ashram stands as a witness to her work and love for nature.

A Very Generous Lady

As a rule Ashram members are not allowed to keep any personal purse with them. But Sister's relatives used give her pocket money during their visits. She was very generous, and what ever pocket money she got from her brothers and sisters for her personal needs, she happily donated to needy persons or causes.

Veettilamma (Mother of the House)

Sister Aleyamma joined the Ashram when she was 36 years old. Till that time, she was busy with the missions work, in her own parishes in Maramon and Pathanapuram. She was very active in Sevika Sanghom, Sunday School and Prayer meetings. Her brother's and sister's children used to affectionately call her "Veettil Amma" which means mother staying at home.

She was a "Veettil Amma" in the Ashram also. Like a caring mother she entertained all the visitors of the Ashram. She was a mother for the evangelists, villagers, children in the hostels etc. Her willingness to serve was exemplary.

Final days

For 52 years she faithfully served the Ashram and the villages in and around Sihora Taluk. In October, 2003, she became sick. Due to diabetes both her kidneys stopped working. Rt. Rev. Joseph Mar Irenaeus Suffragan Metropolitan and Rt. Rev. Thomas Mar Timotheos visited and prayed for her. She was called to her eternal home on Friday, 31st July, 2003, and was buried in the ashram cemetery. She was a glowing light for the villagers. Many were saved through her selfless work. Her life is a challenge for all of us. Still there are millions and millions in the North Indian villages who have never heard about Jesus even once in their lives. Who will go there??? *Then I heard the Lord say "Whom shall I send? Who will be our messenger?" I answered, "I will go! Send me!"* Isaiah 6:8.

The Challenge still remains.

Sister Aleyamma has finished her race and now she is with the Lord. The harvest is plenty, but the workers are few. We need more and more persons like Sister Aleyamma to work for the Lord. Millions and millions of villagers are there in North India who have never heard about our Saviour even once in their lives. Who will go???

Bibliography

- 1 Christha Panthi Ashramam- Samarpitharude Sanghayathra Published by Christava Sahithya Samithi, Tiruvalla -2004
- 2 Golden Jubilee Souvenir 1992- Christa Panthi Ashram- Sihora
- 3 Mar Thoma Sabha Directory -1999

Main Events during the time of Sister Aleyamma Varghese

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| 1914 28 June | Beginning of First World War |
| 1916 14 February | Birth of Sister Aleyamma Varghese in Maramon |
| 1917 27 January | Kovoorachen – Ipe Thoma Kathanar- passes away |

| | |
|------------------|---|
| 1917 27 December | Consecration of Abraham Mar Thoma |
| 1918 | Sadhu Sunder Singh visits Maramon Convention |
| 1919 14 February | Formation of Sevika Sanghom |
| 1919 28 June | First World War ends |
| 1923 13 October | Rev. M. C. George (Father of Alexander Mar Thoma) passes away |
| 1923 13 December | Silver Jubilee celebration of Consecration of Titus II |
| 1924 16 January | Mahakavi Kumaran Ashan dies in "Redeemer Boat tragedy" |
| 1924 | Formation of Voluntary Evangelistic Association |
| 1926 | Beginning of Palghat Mission |
| 1926 | Establishment of Mar Thoma Theological Seminary at Kottayam |
| 1927 | Birthday offertory during the church service introduced by Titus II |
| 1930 | Sister Aleyamma accepts Jesus as her personal Saviour. |
| 1930 | Medical aid fund for sick clergy -Introduced in the Church by Titus II 1933 Formation of Yuvajana Sakhyam |
| 1936 | Sister Aleyamma shifts residence from Maramon to Pathanapuram. |
| 1936 27, 28 Dec | Centenary Celebrations of Reformation in Maramon Mar Thoma Church |
| 1937 30 December | Consecration of Juhanon Mar Thoma and Mathews Mar Athanasius |
| 1939 September | Beginning of Second World War |
| 1940 | Beginning of Ankola Mission.-North Karnataka |
| 1942 | Beginning of Sihora Ashram |
| 1944 4 July | Titus II Mar Thoma passes away. |
| 1944 | Abraham Mar Thoma becomes Metropolitan |
| 1945 2 September | End of the Second World War |
| 1945 30 November | Sadhu Kochoonju Upadeshi passes away |
| 1946 | Chechamma joins in Vanitha Mandiram for Training |
| 1947 27 June | June Beginning of Hoskote Mission, near Bangalore Karnataka |
| 1947 | Beginning of the Women's branch of the Sihora Ashram. |
| 1947 14 July | Punchamannil Mammen Upadeshi passes away. |
| 1947 15 August | Freedom for India |
| 1947 1 September | Abraham Mar Thoma passes away. |
| 1951 21 October | Sister Aleyamma joins in the Sihora Ashram |
| 1967 October | Silver Jubilee of the Ashram |

Notes

Sihora Ashram: Christa Panthi Ashram, Sihora was established in 1942 under the leadership of Rev. K. T. Thomas, Mr. John Varghese and Mr. M. P. Mathew, who later became ordained ministers of the Mar Thoma Church. Sihora is about 40km away from Jabalpur, in Madhya Pradesh. (Christa Panthi Ashram, Darsani Post- 483225, Sihora, M.P.)

Palghat Ashram: Christu Dasa Ashram (first Ashram of the Mar Thoma Church) Palghat was established in 1928. Rev. P. John Varghese (Palakkattachen- who later became the Bishop of the St. Thomas Evangelical Church of India) was the founding leader of this Ashram. (Christu Dasa Ashram, Olive Mount Post-678702, Palghat, Kerala)

Vanitha Mandiram, Tiruvalla: Vanitha Mandiram was established in Tiruvalla in 1925. At the Vanitha Mandiram, women were given training in Mission work, home science and home management, kitchen gardening, etc. in addition to Biblical studies. An Australian missionary, Miss Kellaway was the principal of this institution for 20 years. During the early years many women were trained for Missionary work and sent to various places outside Kerala. Sister Chechamma (Mathilunkal, Kuttapuzha, Tiruvalla), Miss K. J. Aleyamma, Miss P. O. Sosamma, Miss Mariamma John, Miss P. G. Aleyamma (Sihora Ashram) and Mrs. Mariamma Joseph (Manon, Maramon-one of the co-founders of the Hoskote Mission) were students of the Mandiram. The main mottos of the Institution are Prayer, Worship, Study, Witnessing, and Discipline. In 1946, Miss Kellaway went back home to Australia.

Founding members of Sihora Ashram: Rev. K. T. Thomas (1909-1989) (Karimprampil, Anaprampal) Rev. John Varghese (1915-1987) (Valethu Thoppil, Puthen Cavu, Chengannur) and Rev. M.P.Mathew (1914-2004) (Mavelil, Kaviyoor) were the founding members of the Ashram.

Rev. Dr. C. E. Abraham (M.A, B.D): (1898-1985) Chruthottathil, Kozhencherry was the Professor/ Principal of the Serampore Theological College, West Bengal from 1925-1959. He also served as the Secretary of the Yuvajana Sakhyam, General Secretary of the Evangelistic Association and Editor of the First Mar Thoma Church Directory. He was born on 7 January, 1898, became a priest in 1930, and passed away on 18 March, 1985.

CHRISTA PANTHI ASHRAM, DARSANI, SIHORA
Life of the Ashram Community

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|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| 5 .00 am | Rising bell |
| 5.30 - 6.30 | Morning worship, Bible study |
| 6.00 - 7.00 | Private Devotion |
| 7.00 - 8.00 | Cleaning rooms, Courtyard etc |
| 8.00 - 8.30 | Breakfast |
| 8.30 - 12.00 | Work |
| 12.00 noon | Intercession |
| 12.30 - 3.00 pm | Lunch & Rest |
| 3.00 pm | Meditation of the Cross |
| 3.30 - 6.00 | Work |
| 7.00 - 7.30 | Sandhya Meditation |
| 8.30 | Supper |
| 9.30 pm | Vespers |
| 10.00 pm -7.00 am | Silence |

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All for HIS glory

Your's in Christ,

John Joseph

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