

FATHER PHILIP THAYIL:
VISIONARY AND INNOVATOR (1917-2003)

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1. Introduction

It is quite natural that anyone who intends to profile a Salesian personality in South India would quite naturally think of Fr. Philip Thayil as someone deserving of being made known to a wider Salesian readership. A late vocation, who joined the Salesian aspirantate at the age of 29 and that with no other academic qualifications than that of having completed his secondary school education, he was destined to leave a legacy as a trailblazer. Charged with a tremendous love for Don Bosco and with a passion for the adolescents and youth, he sought out ways and means to insert the Salesian charism especially in the state of Kerala. This study proposes to capture the personality of Fr. Philip and highlight the innovative dimension of his apostolate focussing in effect on the years of his ministry at Vaduthala, Palluruthy and Vennala in the present-day city of Cochin (Kochi). During this period, he was active as vocation promoter, was in charge of publications and manifested a keen interest in the performing arts intending to put them at the service of evangelization.

Given the fact of there being no literature available on Fr. Philip, except for the obituary letter prepared by Fr. Joyce Thonikuzhiyil, this paper is constrained to base itself on unpublished material available in the house archives of Vennala and the provincial archives of Bangalore.

The study begins with a note on the State of Kerala, the immediate context of Fr. Philip's apostolic enterprises, followed by a brief life-sketch of Fr. Philip before centring itself on those creative initiatives of his which made him a much admired Salesian known for his many innovative and ahead-of-his-times initiatives.

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2. Kerala History, Society and Culture

2.1. History

Kerala (*Keralam* in the regional language) is one of the 29 Indian states and is situated on the South-Western Coast of India, which in the Western literature was for long referred to as *Malabar*. Spread over 38,863 square km, Kerala is the twenty-second largest Indian state by area, and the thirteenth largest by population having 33 million inhabitants¹.

The people of Kerala are known as *Malayalees* or Keralites. “Malayalam”, the native language, has its origin from the words *mala* meaning mountain and *alam* meaning land or locality. Hence, the term *Malayali* refers to the people living in the mountain regions in the South West of India with Malayalam as their mother-tongue².

At the time of the Indian Independence Movement, there were two major princely states in what is Kerala today – the Travancore (Thiruvithamkur) State and the Kingdom of Cochin. They joined the Union of India after India gained independence in 1947.

The two states were merged to form Travancore-Cochin (Thiru-Kochi) in 1949, and on 1st January 1950 the State of Travancore-Cochin became a federal state in the Indian Union.

After the States Reorganization Act on 1st November 1956 the modern-day state of Kerala was formed by the merger of the Travancore-Cochin state (excluding the four southern taluks) with the Malabar district and Kasargod taluk of the South Canara district of the erstwhile Madras Presidency³.

2.2. Society

Kerala society was highly caste-ridden and was dominated by the upper castes. The caste system and the untouchability associated with it⁴ were intro-

¹ Cf <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malayali>, accessed on 7 March 2019; William A. NOBLE, *Kerala* @ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Kerala>, accessed on 5 March 2019.

² “Malayalam” originally referred to the land ruled by the Tamil kings of the Chera dynasty, and only later became the name of the language. Cf <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malayalam>, accessed on 9 March 2019.

³ Cf A. Sreedhara MENON, *A Survey of Kerala History*. Madras, S. Viswanathan Printers and Publishers 1984, pp. 301-311; http://www.universityofcalicut.info/SDE/VISem_formation_of_kerala_society_and_culture.pdf, p. 5, accessed on 6 March 2019.

⁴ Various deprivations and prohibitions imposed on the lower castes by the higher ones.

duced in Kerala with the advent of the Namboodiris (Brahmins)⁵. By about the VIII century a chain of Brahmin settlements, with a large number of them in Central Kerala, had come up in the state⁶. This led to a deep chasm between the high and low castes with the latter being denied entry into the temples and having to live with a series of oppressive taxes and cesses with the former having the monopoly of land ownership⁷. It is generally believed, that the caste system as practised in Kerala was the most oppressive form in the whole of India⁸.

However, the late XIX and the early XX centuries witnessed the emergence of powerful social reform movements in Kerala. These movements were indigenous in origin and led by individual reformers, who stemmed from the low as well as the high castes and were inspired by religious leaders, scholars, writers and journalists⁹.

These reformers revolted against Brahmin ascendancy, worked for the abolition of the caste system and campaigned for the eradication of untouchability. They advocated reforms among the untouchables, worked for the uplifting of the depressed classes and promoted inter-caste marriages and inter-caste dining in an effort to counter the inequalities inherent in the caste system¹⁰.

The fight for social equality paved the way for the Temple Entry Movement and anti-untouchability agitation centred around the Vaikom and Guruvayoor temples. The Temple Entry Proclamation of Sri Chithira Thirunal, the Maharaja of Thiruvitamkur, on 12th November 1936, which permitted temple

⁵ *Ibid.* Untouchables are those belonging to lower castes who suffer from various disabilities in every walk of life – social, religious, economic and political – many of which were traditionally prescribed and socially enforced by the higher castes. Cf Issac CHANIKKAMANNIL, *Untouchables in Kerala* at http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/498/7/07_chapter%202.pdf, pp. 20-22, accessed on 10 March 2019. The entire paper is an eyeopener to the extent and nature of the deplorable conditions to which the untouchables were subjected. The Shodhganga@inflibnet is a reservoir of Indian theses, providing a platform for research students to deposit their Ph.D. theses and make them available to the entire scholarly community.

⁶ Cf https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Kerala, accessed on 5 March 2019; T. K. GANGADHARAN, *Evolution of Kerala History and Culture*. Calicut, Calicut University Central Co-Operative Stores Ltd. [s.d.], pp. 92-96, 134-137.

⁷ Cf *Ibid.*, pp. 184-189; A. S. MENON, *A Survey of Kerala History...*, pp. 317-321.

⁸ According to Kerala tradition, Dalits (outcastes or casteless) were forced to maintain a distance of 64 feet from the *Savarnas* (caste people) as they were thought to pollute them. Other low castes were forbidden within distances of 72 feet, 32 feet or 24 feet from the *Savarnas*. Cf http://www.universityofcalicut.info/SDE/VIsem_formation_of_kerala_society_and_culture.pdf, pp. 110-117, accessed on 6 March 2019.

⁹ Cf I. CHANIKKAMANNIL, *Untouchables in Kerala...*, p. 88.

¹⁰ Cf T. K. GANGADHARAN, *Evolution of Kerala History and Culture...*, pp. 287-301.

entry to the *Avarnas* (those who do not belong to the four major castes), was the crowning achievement of the movement. These reform movements in the early decades of the XX century changed the course of the socio-religious history of Kerala and put an end to the system of untouchability in South Kerala¹¹.

2.3. Communism in Kerala

The advance of the Left movement in Kerala is a subject that is of utmost importance and great interest to the cause of its social progress. The Communist Movement in India emerged out of the struggle for national liberation and for the introduction of political, economic and social reforms, by the Congress party led by Mahatma Gandhi. However, the communist elements gradually shifted their ideological commitment to Marxism-Leninism and disseminated it among workers, peasants, students and intellectuals, thus laying the organizational foundation for the future communist party. Through study classes and pamphleteering, the members spread the party ideology among the young and eventually won them over to the movement. The humanitarian programmes organized by the party for the peasants, the working-classes and their families which included providing medical aid, tending their sick and ailing, helping them to get loans, fighting for their causes and protecting them from petty official oppression helped to bring over prospective members into the party fold¹².

The high rate of literacy in Kerala did not fail to nurture a general interest in reading and shaping opinions. The politically charged ambience created also through party propaganda, chronic unemployment among the educated, intense population pressure on land and the lack of industrial enterprises to relieve that pressure – all constituted a fertile soil for the growth of communism. All these factors led, in 1957, to the election of the first communist government anywhere in the world¹³. The inherent atheism of the communist movement could not but also have an impact on the Church and its mission of evangelization and catechesis.

¹¹ Cf http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/498/7/07_chapter%202.pdf, accessed on 8 March 2019; T. K. GANGADHARAN, *Evolution of Kerala History and Culture...*, pp. 301-306; http://www.universityofcalicut.info/SDE/VIsem_formation_of_kerala_society_and_culture.pdf, p. 118, accessed on 6 March 2019.

¹² Cf http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/36088/7/07_chapter1.pdf [*Rise of Communist Movement in Kerala*], pp. 21-33, accessed on 6 March 2019.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 47, accessed on 6 March 2019.

2.4. Performing Arts of Kerala

Kerala is reputed for the diversity of its performing arts. These include five classical dance forms: *Kathakali*, *Mohiniyattam*, *Thullal* and *Krishnanattam*, which originated and developed in the temple theatres under the patronage of various royal houses during the classical period. *Kerala natanam*, *Thirayattam*, *Kaliyattam*, *Theyyam*, *Koothu* and *Padayani* are other dance forms associated with the temple culture of the region. Some traditional dance forms such as *Margamkali* and *Parichamuttukali* are popular among the Syrian Christians and *Chavittu nadakom* among the Latin Christians, while *Oppana* and *Duffimuttu* are distinctive of the Muslims of the state¹⁴.

Traditionally, each of these temple arts were performed only by *Ambalavasi* castes which was a generic term used for those caste groups in Kerala which rendered services in the temple. However, with the reform movements gaining in strength the caste barriers linked to the art forms became redundant¹⁵.

Thullal, which is of particular interest to the present study, has its origins in the classical principles of *Natya Sastra*, a treatise on art originating in the II century BCE. The word *Thullal* in the Malayalam language literally means *to jump* or *leap about*. It was popularised in the XVIII century by the legendary Malayali poet Kunchan Nambiar as an alternative to the *Chakyar koothu* which is another art form of Kerala¹⁶.

Kunchan Nambiar has immortalized himself by his *Thullal* songs. The great merit of these songs is that they were written in Malayalam, which even the common people could understand. Nambiar's songs are also distinguished by the social satire they contain and their fine sense of humour. His poems allude to several prevailing social customs and have thus a local colouring even in the midst of their Puranic themes. Nambiar was essentially a poet of realism and he used Malayalam poetry for the first time as an instrument of social change¹⁷.

Thullal spawned three separate versions viz., *Ottanthullal*, *Seethankan thullal* and *Parayan thullal*¹⁸. It was performed by a solo performer, with a

¹⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kerala>, accessed on 5 March 2019.

¹⁵ Cf <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ambalavasi>, accessed on 17 April 2019.

¹⁶ A. S. MENON, *A Survey of Kerala History...*, p. 339. The *Chakyar* is a satirist, who, using narrative, mime, wit and innuendo communicates with the audience. The communication often results in jokes, sometimes at the cost of the audience at which no one is expected to take offence. The performances are based on themes from the epics.

¹⁷ Cf <http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in>, accessed on 5 March 2019, [The Traditional Arts of Kerala and their Ritualistic Aspects, p. 172.]

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

colourful costume and makeup similar to that of a Kathakali artist, who acts and dances while reciting the *Thullal* lyrics. A chorus of one artist or more repeats each sentence as it is completed. Old sayings and elements of folklore are used in the recitation¹⁹.

In general, till the emergence of the reform movements music and the performing arts in Kerala were closely associated with the temples and with the temple culture²⁰.

3. The Salesian Scenario

3.1. *Salesians in India*

When Fr. Philip began his priestly ministry there were three Salesian Provinces in India – Madras (Chennai), Calcutta (Kolkata) and Guwahati. The Province of Madras covered the whole of South India with houses clustered in and around Madras, Tirupattur and Vellore, and with presences in Bombay (Mumbai), Ernakulam and Goa. The Province of Calcutta consisted of 11 houses in West Bengal and 3 in Burma (Myanmar). The Province of Guwahati consisted of the states of Assam and the four Union Territories of Manipur, Tripura, Naga Hills and the North-East Frontier Agency (now Arunachal Pradesh) with 29 houses, most of them mission stations belonging to the Shillong and Dibrugarh dioceses²¹.

At this time there were also four dioceses in India entrusted to the Salesians: the Archdiocese of Madras-Mylapore²² in the territory of the Madras Province, the dioceses of Shillong²³ and Dibrugarh²⁴ in the Guwahati Province and the Diocese of Krishnagar²⁵ in the Calcutta Province.

¹⁹ Cf https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottan_Thullal, accessed on 5 March 2019; <https://www.keralatourism.org/artforms/thullal-performing-art/23>, accessed on 5 March 2019.

²⁰ Cf http://www.universityofcalicut.info/SDE/VIsem_formation_of_kerala_society_and_culture.pdf, p. 24, accessed on 6 March 2019.

²¹ Joseph THEKKEDATH, *A History of the Salesians of Don Bosco in India. From the beginning up to 1951-52*. Bangalore, Kristu Jyoti Publications 2005, I, pp. 18, 97, 481-504; vol. II, pp. 1359-1363; Louis KUMPILUVELIL - Charles PANACKEL (Eds.), *A Journey with the Young. Don Bosco India Centenary 1906-2006*. New Delhi, Salesian Provincial Conference of South Asia 2006, pp. 33-46, 81-129.

²² J. THEKKEDATH, *A History...*, I, pp. 425-475.

²³ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 200-207, II, 1090-1092.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 1115-1130, 1297-1298.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 310-353.

3.2. Salesian Presence in Kerala

The first Salesian presence in Kerala²⁶, begun in 1956, is at Vaduthala in Ernakulam – now part of the Cochin Corporation –, in the Archdiocese of Verapoly (Varapuzha). Though predominantly Christian, the area was nevertheless, greatly impacted on by communism. There were also marked differences among the people on the lines of religion, caste, party politics and economic status.

Fr. Francis Guezou²⁷, a French missionary, assisted by two young clerics – Varghese Menacherry and Louis Panikulangara²⁸ –, both of Kerala origin, was the pioneer Salesian missionary at Vaduthala. His mission was to start a youth centre at Vaduthala and given the communist influence in the region, he and his young helpers had to deal with and counter much suspicion and hostility.

In fact, a couple of times in 1957 the communist newspapers targeted Fr. Guezou by purporting that foreign missionaries were indulging in unlawful activities and rousing up the youth of Ernakulam against the communist government. Consequently, he was subjected to police harassment. However, with the unflinching support of the Church and the local people and thanks also to his own charismatic personality and winning ways, the crisis was overcome.

Salesian work at Vaduthala progressed further with the starting of an aspirantate for the boys who passed VI standard and were kept at Vaduthala for a year for better selection before being sent on to the aspirantate at Tirupattur or to those of the Provinces of Calcutta (Kolkata), and Gauhati (Guwahati)²⁹.

²⁶ The first Salesian presence in Kerala was actually in Trivandrum (Thiruvananthapuram) in the then Travancore state, where the well-known St Joseph's English High School belonging to the Belgian Carmelites was taken up in 1946, and a second one at Nagercoil in Kottar diocese, also in the state of Travancore (currently in Tamil Nadu), where the Carmel High School which had also a boarding was bought from the diocese in 1947. Salesians left both these places in 1950 due to disciplinary and administrative problems. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 1028-1066.

²⁷ Fr. Guezou came to India as a student of theology and after his ordination served as *socius* in the novitiate at Yercaud for three years before being assigned to Vaduthala.

²⁸ Both Menacherry and Panikulangara inherited the charism of Fr. Guezou and were much loved by the local populace. As priests too they worked several years at Vaduthala and later at Sneha Bhavan, Palluruthy, where they endeared themselves to the boys. Sneha Bhavan in Palluruthy, Kochi, is a rehabilitation centre for begging and street children established by the Corporation authorities and entrusted to the care of Salesians in 1974. Here too Fr. Varghese Menacherry was the pioneer.

²⁹ Cf Chronicles of the house of Vaduthala: entry for 18 January 1958.

Fr. Philip reached Don Bosco, Vaduthala, in 1959, a year after his ordination and after a one-year stint as liturgical animator at St. Joseph's Technical School, Madras (Chennai).

4. Early Life and Formation of Fr. Philip Thayil

At the beginning of the XX century Mannanam, in the then state of Travancore, was a rural, agricultural area within the confines of the Diocese of Changanassery, with a population of about 8000. Philip Thayil was born there as the sixth child of Joseph, an agriculturist and Alice, a house-wife, on 28th April 1917. He was baptised a week later, on 5th May 1917, at the Kudamaloor parish. His father had an educational level superior to most of his compatriots, and his mother, like most women of the time, had but an average education. One of his three sisters became a religious³⁰, and there were four priests among his relatives³¹.

Philip did his schooling at St Ephraem's English High School, Mannanam, and completed his ESLC (English School Leaving Certificate) in 1937 from the Education Department of the Travancore Government. After that he stayed home engaged in farming along with his brothers³².

He spent a year (1945-46) at St Joseph's Mission Home at Muttampalam (Kanjikuzhy), Kottayam district, where he completed a junior course in Latin. At the end of the academic year, on 16th April 1946, he wrote to the Rector of Salesian House, Tirupattur, asking to be admitted there. This request was followed by another dated 27th April 1946 sent directly to Fr. Joseph Carreño, the Salesian Provincial of Madras, who was an enthusiastic promoter of local vocations, expressing his ardent desire to be a religious priest. He emphasized that though a late vocation, he had no anxiety about the long course of formation, which he would have to undergo. Although he was 29 years of age, the Rector of St Joseph's Mission Home too recommended him. The parents' consent to join the Salesians was signed by his mother on 10th March 1948.

Having reached Tirupattur in 1948³³ and after a short stay there he moved to Kotagiri for his novitiate (15 May 1948 to 24 May 1949), and received the religious habit on 15th August 1948. He made his first profession,

³⁰ Fr. Philip had actually 6 brothers and three sisters.

³¹ Provincial Archives, Bangalore [PAINK], F 90 f/2 [Personal file of Fr. Philip Thayil].

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

for a period of three years, on 24th May 1949 and remained on at Kotagiri to complete his course in philosophy³⁴.

Bro. Philip began to have a taste of active Salesian life at Tirupattur, where he did his practical training from June 1951. He taught history and geography in Form IV, while being also in charge of the kitchen. In June 1953, he left for his theological studies at Mawlai, where on 4th December 1954 he made his final profession. The course of his initial formation concluded with his ordination in December 1957³⁵.

5. Areas of Apostolate

Fr. Philip started his priestly ministry in May 1958 with his appointment as the catechist (liturgical animator) and prefect (administrator) at St Joseph's Technical School, Chennai. The following year he was transferred to Don Bosco, Vaduthala, as Prefect and Vocation Director. From 1966 he held additional responsibilities as Catechist, Editor of the Salesian Bulletin and Manager of Don Bosco Publications.

Though transferred to Palluruthy in May 1975, he continued to be the Director of Don Bosco Publications from his new base there at Don Bosco Welfare Centre. From May 1983, after spending a year at Mundamvely, he settled at Don Bosco, Vennala, the newly established *Biblical Cultural Centre cum Don Bosco Publications Centre*, which had also a printing press. After spending five years there and having established the centre on a firm footing, he was transferred back to Don Bosco, Palluruthy, in November 1989, at his own request. From there he carried forward the activities of *Don Bosco Publications*, especially the mobile library and film unit³⁶.

His final transfer took place in May 1994, when he returned as confessor to the community of Don Bosco, Vennala, where he eventually breathed his last on 15th February 2003. His death was preceded by a period of protracted illness which required also frequent hospitalization. His final hospitalization was on Monday, 10th February, at the Lisie Hospital, Ernakulam and his mortal remains were laid to rest in the Salesian cemetery at Mannuthy on 17th February³⁷.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ PAINK G 44 a/2, Correspondence with the Provincial office (1981-1990). Letter *Joseph Thekkedath – William Nellickal*, Bangalore 10 December 1989; letter *Joseph Thekkedath – Philip Thayil*, Bangalore 29 October 1980.

³⁷ *Ibid.* F 90 f/2.

5.1. *Vocation Promoter*

Fr. Philip took up the responsibility of Vocation (Director) Promoter from the time he was transferred to Vaduthala as administrator in May 1959. In December of the same year, he began his “vocation tours”³⁸. Primarily he was responsible for recruiting young boys who completed standards VI and VII for the three provinces of Chennai, Guwahati and Kolkata. In addition he also recruited boys for St Paul’s Seminary Shillong of the Archdiocese of Shillong-Gauhati, for the Diocese of Kohima-Imphal and for that of Dibrugarh³⁹.

Fr. Philip travelled the length and breadth of Kerala looking for prospective vocations to Salesian life among upper primary boys. He visited schools and parishes where he addressed the boys – in most cases that being the first time ever they would have heard about Don Bosco. He would collect the details of those who were interested in joining the Salesians and later call them for an interview along with their fathers. Later Fr. Philip would go to a parish, where he would invite the interested boys from all the neighbouring parishes to meet him, and there and then, the selection would be made. In later years, the boys so selected had also to attend a vocation camp, which would be advertised in Catholic papers and journals⁴⁰. Subsequently Fr. Philip also started selecting post-SSLC boys as there were several requests for them from the dioceses of North-East India. But in 1975, for various reasons, Fr. Philip requested to be relieved of the responsibility of recruiting post-SSLC boys for the North-East⁴¹.

Fr. Philip’s means of transport was a motorbike which carried him to every nook and corner of Kerala. However, in 1970 the Provincial, Fr. Luigi Di Fiore, allowed him to replace the bike with a car⁴².

Many Salesians today – the author included – owe their Salesian vocation, after God, to Fr. Philip’s untiring efforts to search them out even in the more remote corners of Kerala. Fr. Johnny Nedungatt voicing the sentiments also of several other Salesians recruited by Fr. Philip, wrote to the Provincial of Bangalore after reading the latter’s circular which contained a note on Fr. Philip’s death. “You said rightly in your circular about Salesians who are

³⁸ *Ibid.* G 43 a/7. House Chronicles (Annual & Quinquennial): entries for 25 May 1959, 3 December 1959.

³⁹ House Archives of Don Bosco, Vennala [HA Vennala]. Unclassified personal files of Fr. Philip Thayil [Thayil]; PAINK G 43 a/7: entries for 13 November 1960, 30 May 1963.

⁴⁰ PAINK G 43 a/7: entries for 18 May 1971.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* Letter *Philip Thayil – Provincial*, Palluruthy 28 July 1975.

⁴² HA Vennala, Thayil. Letter *Luigi Di Fiore – Philip Thayil*, Tirupattur 5 November 1970.

brought into the congregation by him. I am one of them. Fr. Philip was the only Salesian who came to our school. Fr. Philip lives on in many Salesians”⁴³.

5.2. Founder of Don Bosco, Vennala

Don Bosco, Vennala, in Kochi (Kerala), founded by Fr. Philip turned out to be the hub of many an innovative venture. Indeed a genial creation of Fr. Philip, it is a complex consisting of two major units – a publication centre including a press, and a cultural centre.

When Fr. Philip was transferred to Don Bosco Welfare Centre, Palluruthy in 1975, the publication centre, which had its origin at Vaduthala, was also shifted there. Don Bosco Welfare Centre was a residence for the Salesians serving at Sneha Bhavan, a centre run by the Cochin Corporation for boys rescued from the streets of the city. Some of these boys were also given training in a selected trade. In 1976, Fr. Philip started a printing press there with the aim of giving the boys of Sneha Bhavan training in composing, printing and binding. Thus was born Don Bosco Press⁴⁴.

When plans were afoot to enlarge the press, heeding the suggestion of Fr. Guezou, who advised against it as he considered Palluruthy not all that suited for either a press or a publication centre, a search was launched for a more convenient location. Fr. Guezou also assured him of financial support for the project⁴⁵. The Provincial Council approved the plan on 16 May 1981 and the search that followed resulted in the purchase of a plot of land at Palarivattam, the future site for Don Bosco, Vennala⁴⁶.

Initially eighty cents of land costing Rs. 4,59,000 was found and the necessary permissions, from the Provincial and from the Major Superiors in

⁴³ PAINK F 90 f2. Condolence letter *Johny Nedungatt – Provincial*, Siliguri 1 March 2003. Fr. Johny Nedungatt, a Salesian priest belonging to Kolkata province, is an Independent Education Management Professional.

⁴⁴ PAINK G 42 a/2. Cf also *ibid.* G 42 b/2. Letter *George Chettupuzha – Provincial and Council*, Palluruthy 14 December 1982.

⁴⁵ HA Vennala, Thayil. “Write up about Don Bosco, Vennala”, typewritten and autographed by Fr. Philip Thayil dated 1 November 1989, p. 4. The same “Write up” is found also in PAINK G 44 a/2 Kochi – Vennala, *Correspondence with the provincial office (1981-1990)*. [Hereafter “Write up”].

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* G 42 b/2: Kochi – Palluruthy Don Bosco, *Correspondence with the provincial office 1973-1992*. Letters *Philip Thayil – Provincial*, Palluruthy 13 March 1981, 17 March 1981, 25 March 1981. Cf also HA Vennala, Thayil. “The Scope of Don Bosco, Vennala”, typewritten, autographed by Fr. Philip Thayil, dated 1 November 1989, p. 5. The same document is found also in PAINK G 44 a/2 Kochi – Vennala, *Correspondence with the provincial office (1981-1990)*. [Hereafter “The Scope of Don Bosco, Vennala”].

Rome, for purchasing it were obtained⁴⁷. On 23rd May 1984, exemption from building rules was also got from the civil authorities⁴⁸. Further purchases were made from different owners through 25 separate sales-deeds till a total of 2.4 acres were acquired at a total cost of Rs. 30,10,000 and a complex costing Rs. 160,00,000 was constructed there⁴⁹.

The two sections – press and cultural centre – were built and equipped at a total cost of Rs 2,15,40,000. The amount for the same was raised through Fr. Philip’s strenuous efforts from benefactors, funding agencies and Salesian superiors at the Generalate in Rome⁵⁰.

Fr. Francis Guezou⁵¹, a visionary and a daring pioneer like Fr. Philip, true to his earlier promise, came forward in a big way to support him financially with the help of his French benefactors, especially in the construction of the press and the cultural centre⁵². He also contributed to the maintenance of the resident boys⁵³.

The intention of the donors, Fr. Philip used to reiterate, was to cater to poor boys in both the sections of Don Bosco Vennala. The printing school was to train poor boys who had the aptitude for getting qualified as ITC students, though many of them would not be able to pursue their studies in a university⁵⁴. The cultural centre, instead, was to train poor boys as qualified cultural artists. In 1985, when the cultural centre had already been functioning for three years, Fr. Philip, writing to Fr. Thomas Panakezham, the then Regional Councillor, specified further the scope of the Cultural Centre as spreading the Word of God through vocal, instrumental and visual cultural representations⁵⁵. Accordingly, ample hostel accommodation was also planned in both the cen-

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* G 44 a/2. Letter *Thomas Thayil – Rector Major*, [Bangalore] 5 June 1981; Permission granted by Fr. Egidio Viganò, Rome 15 June 1981.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* G 44 a/2. Letter *Philip Thayil – Provincial*, Palluruthy 25 March 1982.

⁴⁹ “Write up”, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁰ “Write up”, p. 2.

⁵¹ Fr. Guezou nurtured a great esteem for and an intimate rapport with Fr. Philip having known first hand his ardent zeal and untiring efforts in the search for unbeaten paths to educate youth. In an interview with Fr. Maria Arokia Raj in July 2003, to the question “Which Salesians have influenced you most and how”, one of the four persons mentioned was Fr. Philip, about whom he said, “Fr. Philip Thayil: He went against the current”. Interview narrated in Maria Arokiam KANAGA, *A Man Without Frontiers. The Daring Life of the French Missionary, Fr. Francis Guezou SDB*. Chennai, Don Bosco Publications 2009, p. 332.

⁵² “Write up”, p. 4.

⁵³ “The Scope of Don Bosco, Vennala”, p. 5.

⁵⁴ PAINK G 44 a/2. Letter *Joseph Thekkedath – Rector Major*, Bangalore 12 June 1985.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Letter *Philip Thayil – Thomas Panakezham*, Vennala, 11 December 1985. Fr. Thomas Panakezham was the Regional Councillor for Asia for three terms. He was formerly provincial of Madras province, being the first Indian confrere to be appointed to that post.

tres without forgetting to provide the necessary training facilities also for the poorer among the day-scholars⁵⁶.

5.2.1. Ardent Apostle of the Press

5.2.1.1. Don Bosco Publications

While at Don Bosco Vaduthala, and doing his rounds of Kerala in search of vocations, Fr. Philip observed in different places the ill effects of bad books on the children and the negative influence of communist literature on the people. The only means to counter the menace, he felt, was to diffuse good literature. So, following in the footsteps of Don Bosco, Fr. Philip set upon a plan to begin a publication centre in order to diffuse Catholic and Salesian literature at affordable rates to the families and thus help promote vocations to the priesthood and to religious life. Accordingly, he approached the then Provincial, Fr. Luigi Di Fiore⁵⁷, for permission to start a publication centre. The Provincial not only gladly gave him the required permission but also offered a sum of Rs. 6,000 for printing the life of Don Bosco. Thus, the publication centre took off in 1967 with the Malayalam edition of *The Life of Don Bosco* by Anderson⁵⁸.

Another ambitious project of his was to facilitate the setting up of small “family libraries” for the moral and intellectual development of youth⁵⁹. Writing to Archbishop D.S. Lourdasamy, Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, for financial support to realize the project of the *Children’s Bible*, Fr. Philip outlined the scope of Don Bosco Publications in the following words:

“My prime move [motive] was the establishment of a Don Bosco Publication Centre to encourage Christian families to organize a family library of their own, wherein they could stock up religious books, literature, biographies of saints and great men and other knowledgeable books”⁶⁰.

⁵⁶ “The Scope of Don Bosco, Vennala”, p. 1.

⁵⁷ Fr. Luigi Di Fiore, born in Italy, came to India as a novice. He was the provincial of Madras from 1964-70. He returned to Italy and later went to Australia, where he died.

⁵⁸ “Write up”, pp. 1-2: Though in this document Fr. Thayil says it was in 1969, the life of Don Bosco by Anderson was published in Malayalam in 1967. Fr. Thayil was appointed Director of Don Bosco Publications in 1966.

⁵⁹ Cf Palluruthy Don Bosco Publication Centre, “Dasavarsha [Decennial] report 1969-1979” [Hereafter “Dasavarsha report”], pp. 2-3. The report was presented by Fr. Philip on the occasion of the solemn release of “*Kuttikalude Bible*”.

⁶⁰ HA Vennala, Thayil. Letter *Philip Thayil – D.S. Lourdasamy*, Palluruthy 5 February 1977, p. 2. The same appeal was sent also to other individuals and agencies.

During the ten-year period 1969-1979 fourteen titles totalling nearly 200,000 copies were printed, seven others were in print and three more ready to go to the press⁶¹.

Since the principal scope of the centre was to foster reading habit in the younger generation and thus already at a tender age give the right orientation to their character, the publication centre gave priority to biographies, most of them of Salesian inspiration and the rest of a general Catholic nature. He felt that reading the lives of great people would be a source of edification, inspiration and stimulus to follow along the paths traced by them⁶².

“*Kuttikalude Bible*” [*Children’s Bible*] was a project conceived by Fr. Philip to print a pictorial Bible for children to protect them from the unhealthy influences of the generally misleading “propagandist” literature, especially those promoted by the communists⁶³. It also had at the same time the scope of cultivating poetic talent in Catholic children. The *Children’s Bible* contained selected Biblical episodes both in prose and verse forms and was adorned with multicolour images. The prose part was authored by Mrs. Annie Thayil and the section in verse was composed and set to the tune of the “*Thullal*” dance form by Mr. T.C. George Kakkanad⁶⁴. Fr. Philip’s idea was to have ready-to-use Bible passages for presentation through various forms of performing arts to spread the Gospel message.

The *Children’s Bible* received rave reviews in several newspapers and periodicals and was acclaimed by eminent Malayalam poets and literary figures as a breakthrough in Malayalam Christian literature and as a masterpiece in the world of Malayalam poetry. It was considered an exceptional literary work as it had succeeded in presenting serious Biblical themes in an indigenous dance form, which, hitherto was used only for rendering humorous episodes⁶⁵.

“*Kuttikalude Bible*” was solemnly released in a colourful function on 3rd June 1979 at the Town Hall, Ernakulam, by his Eminence Joseph Cardinal Parekattil⁶⁶. It was a gift to children in the International Year of the

⁶¹ “Dasavarsha report”, p. 5. Cf also PAINK G 42 a Kochi – Palluruthy Don Bosco: a/2 Projects – list, hand written and autographed by Fr. Philip Thayil, dated 30 April 1980, of books published, under print and under film process.

⁶² “Dasavarsha report”, p. 5.

⁶³ HA Vennala, Thayil. Cf *Joseph Kelanthara – D. S. Lourdusamy*, Cochin 3 February 1977.

⁶⁴ “Dasavarsha report”, pp. 6-8.

⁶⁵ HA Vennala, Thayil. Cf Letters of appreciation and reviews published in the print media.

⁶⁶ HA Vennala, Thayil. Cf Invitation cum programme of solemn release of “*Kuttikalude Bible*”. Joseph Cardinal Parekattil was an Indian prelate of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church. He served as Archbishop of Ernakulam from 1956 to 1984, and was elevated to the cardinalate in 1969.

Child⁶⁷. 25,000 copies were printed at a total cost of Rs. 13,72,950, as per a 1977 estimate⁶⁸. The fact of how significant the diffusion of “*Kuttikalude Bible*” had become for Fr. Philip may be gathered from his request to the superiors to postpone his attending an ongoing formation course in 1980, as he was at the time busy with the sale of this book to school teachers, college professors, factory-workers, etc.⁶⁹.

Fr. Philip brought out a *Kindergarten Bible* as well, for small kids – also in verse – with abundant Biblical themes for cultural presentation⁷⁰.

He also established a *Children’s Library* at Don Bosco, Vennala, in 1988 to commemorate the death centenary of Don Bosco. It was open to the public and had the scope of promoting the habit of reading especially among the young⁷¹.

Fr. Philip worked arduously not only to bring out the books, but also to sell them. He did not just wait for people to come and buy his books. His marketing strategy consisted in going round with the books and making them reach as many people as possible. Thus he would set out every Monday with his motorbike loaded with Bibles, books, calendars, medals, etc. and spend the whole week trying to make them reach as many people as possible. He would entrust these items to parishes, seminaries, convents, bookstalls, schools, colleges, religious institutions and factories to be sold to school-teachers, college-professors, factory-workers, etc. He succeeded in convincing the priests and sisters of all the three rites of Kerala (Latin, Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara) as well as the non-Christians in schools and factories of the importance of spreading good literature and thus got also their support and collaboration for the project.

To make the books affordable for families, Fr. Philip devised a scheme whereby the books could be paid for in 24 easy monthly instalments. Through correspondence and periodic personal visits, he monitored the sale of the books, collected the sum for those sold, supplied additional copies and took back the unsold ones. He reached his books practically to every part of Kerala, personally covering all the districts from the north to the south⁷².

⁶⁷ “Dasavarsha report”, p. 8.

⁶⁸ HA Vennala, Thayil. Letter *Philip Thayil – D.S. Lourdasamy*, Palluruthy 5 February 1977, p. 4.

⁶⁹ PAINK F 90 f/2. Letter *Provincial – Philip Thayil*, Bangalore 4 September.

⁷⁰ “The scope of Don Bosco, Vennala”, p. 1.

⁷¹ “A Write up”, p. 1.

⁷² HA Vennala, Thayil. There is a large diary of 1989, with details of those entrusted with the books, books supplied, amount collected and books taken back, from the year 1990. There are more than 250 entries, save instances of doubles. Cf also HA Vennala, Thayil. Letter *Philip Thayil – D.S. Lourdasamy*, Palluruthy 5 February 1977, p. 4.

Fr. Philip also contributed to building up established and developing rural public libraries by furnishing books he had received from USA, including expensive sets of encyclopaedias⁷³. The beneficiaries, who belonged to different religious traditions, were extremely grateful to him for this extraordinary gesture, as they could not ever have even dreamt of coming to possess such books⁷⁴. For Fr. Philip himself, this was part of his public relations efforts to gain the goodwill and sympathy of the public⁷⁵.

Fr. Philip also began a venture of printing and circulating sacred images in the post-card and larger format in order to make them more available and affordable. This initiative was also much appreciated in various quarters with Fr. Di Fiore, former Provincial, congratulating him on this new venture and observing that nothing of the kind was available in India. Medals and pictures were also given as incentives to those who sold the books⁷⁶.

His vocation drive and more so his publications, have earned Fr. Philip the credit of being the one who made Don Bosco known the most in Kerala. Fr. Mylador, who was the Provincial from 1991 to 1997, recognized this fact when he wrote to Fr. Philip, “You have made him [Don Bosco] known in a special way in Kerala”⁷⁷. Fr. Joaquim D’Souza, former Regional Councillor, also had this to say about Fr. Philip:

“He [Fr. Philip Thayil] was a great Salesian who made Don Bosco known and loved in Kerala through his cultural troupe and his Youth [Children’s] Bible and other publications. He had a great love for poor boys and drew many young hearts to the Salesian Congregation”⁷⁸.

⁷³ *Ibid.* Letter *Philip Thayil – Provincial & Councillors*, Cochin [summer] 1975.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* Cf also Letter *A.V. Viman Chand – Philip Thayil*, Prayar 27 January 1990. Viman Chand was the Secretary of the oldest rural library in Kerala, Raja Raja Varma Grandhasala. Cf also letters *Aloysius Puthiaparambil – Philip Thayil*, Arakulam (Idukki) 22 February 1990; *Sebastian Thekkel – Philip Thayil*, Kanjar (Idukki) 3 March 1990.

⁷⁵ PAINK G 42 a/2. Letters *Philip Thayil – Provincial*, Palluruthy 3 December 1989; *Joseph Thekkedath – Philip Thayil*, [Bangalore] 7 December 1989.

⁷⁶ HA Vennala, Thayil. Letter *Luigi Di Fiore – Philip Thayil*, Egmore 5 March 1971.

⁷⁷ PAINK G. Kochi-Vaduthala. Letter *Thomas Mylador – Philip Thayil*, Madras 29 May 1972. Fr. Thomas Mylador, an Indian Salesian, was an efficient administrator. He was the first to introduce external audit of accounts as Economist of Madras Province. He was later Vice-Provincial and Provincial of the Bangalore Province. He died in a fatal road accident in 2015 along with another young confrere.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* F 90 f/2. Condolence e-mail *Joaquim D’Souza – Provincial*, 17 February 2003. Fr. Joaquim D’Souza, an Indian priest, was formerly provincial of Bombay province. He was the Regional Councillor for South Asia for two terms, after which he served as Superior of the *Visitatoria* of the Salesian Pontifical University, Rome, before returning to India.

5.2.1.2. The Press and Training Centre

In the years immediately following the starting of the publications, Fr. Philip had the books printed in presses outside. In this manner he brought out twenty books, mainly of a Salesian nature, totalling over 200,000 copies⁷⁹. In order to make the books available at the most economical rates he envisaged a press, which could also offer training to youngsters. As seen above, this project which was initiated in a limited way at Palluruthy, was finally established at its current location at Vennala.

As delineated by Fr. Guezou, Fr. Philip's mentor and great benefactor, the scope of the centre was to teach printing technology – formal and non-formal – to poor boys, while bringing out good books every year and selling them at subsidised rates or even *gratis* to the deserving. This was the only way to neutralize the negative effects of bad books⁸⁰. Fr. Philip reiterated: “Thus a double aim is achieved – the training of the poor boys in printing technology – both formal and non-formal – and production of good books and other good literature at a minimum cost”⁸¹.

The printing press was launched at Vennala on 8th December 1987 together with a training centre, which, however, did not have organized formal classes in the beginning, but did nevertheless, have an effective “hands-on practical training”. The machinery was far from being high-tech as there were but two treadle letter presses, a folding machine, a sewing machine, a cutting machine and other sundry equipment valued at Rs. 4,75,000. In addition there was also a registered small scale industrial unit with a medal minting machine⁸².

A formal school of printing, actualizing the vision of Fr. Philip, was started only eight years later in 1995 with the name *DB IGACT (Don Bosco Institute of Graphic Arts Communication Technology)*⁸³. DB IGACT offers a two-year Diploma Course in Graphic Arts Technology – involving design, writing, drawing, printing, displaying etc. – with two specializations: Offset Printing Technology and Computer Graphic Designing. The first batch had 7 students⁸⁴. The strength saw a gradual increase in the successive years and

⁷⁹ “Write up”, p. 3.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ HA Vennala, Thayil. “The proposal made for running the publication centre”: a type-written single-page report inserted between “Write up” and “The Scope of Don Bosco, Vennala”.

⁸² “Write up”, p. 1.

⁸³ Fr. Devassy Kollumkudy and Fr. James Plackatt are Salesian priests and Bro Shaji Nedumpurath a Salesian Brother, all the three belonging to the Bangalore Province and trained in printing technology.

⁸⁴ Joyson MULAVARICKAL, *Decennial Years of DB IGACT*, in *DB IGACT 1995-2005. Decennial Release and Past Pupils' Meet*. Vennala, DB IGACT [2005], pp. 21-22.

reached the highest number in 2011-2012 with 68 students. From the time of the starting of the formal training programme in 1995 up to the present, a total of 867 students have passed out of the centre at an yearly average of 36 with an average of 72 students attending the two-year course⁸⁵.

DB IGACT has shown a steady growth in both personnel and machines. The pre-press, press and post-press departments are well equipped with the latest platemaking, printing, cutting, folding and stitching machines. The students passing out are in great demand with a 100% job placement, with some of them also having landed jobs abroad⁸⁶. IGACT has indeed been true to the original vision of Fr. Philip.

5.2.2. Versatile Promoter of Culture

5.2.2.1. Don Bosco Cultural Centre

Don Bosco Cultural Centre is yet another brain-child of Fr. Philip. Initially it was christened “*Don Bosco Biblical Cultural Centre*”⁸⁷, as his original intention was to use art as a means for presenting Bible themes through the various performing arts⁸⁸. The centre was established in 1983 for training poor but talented boys in music (vocal and instrumental) and dance (*bharathanatyam, mohiniyattam, folk dance, Thullal, ballet, kathaprasamgam* etc.) as an effective means for spreading the Word of God using the various cultural expressions of Kerala⁸⁹.

Fr. Philip had rightly noted that in the past the Catholic community had failed to encourage children with an inborn taste in the cultural field with attendant negative consequences. Hence, following the maxim, “Better late than never”, and encouraged and supported by Fr. Guezou, Fr. Philip, in spite of innumerable difficulties, went ahead and founded the cultural centre with the aim, as he himself would put it:

“... to help boys from poor and lower middle class families who are gifted with real taste in Music, Dance and in the use of various musical instruments. Along

⁸⁵ Based on details from the Admission Register, provided by the Principal, IGACT Training Centre, on 14 March 2019.

⁸⁶ Of the students who passed out between 1997 and 2004, those employed in Kerala number 119, outside Kerala 25 and 22 abroad, while 11 have been assumed as staff at DB IGACT itself. Cf *DB IGACT 1995-2005. Decennial Release and Past Pupils' Meet*, pp. [74-80].

⁸⁷ “The Scope of Don Bosco, Vennala”, pp. 1, 4.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

with their school studies they are given training in various forms of dances, music and the use of various musical instruments”⁹⁰.

Fr. Philip was in the habit of asserting that the Cultural Centre has a unique scope, viz. to train boys in the various performing arts and form them into different cultural troupes for presenting Biblical themes to the public. “The ultimate aim of this centre”, he was quick to explain, “may be put as[:] we help the poor boys to develop their God-given talents, so too we make use of their services to spread the Word of God by staging Biblical themes to the public”⁹¹.

This Centre was envisaged as a unique institution with the youngsters being offered an academic education concomitant with their cultural training. As such, both branches of studies would be accorded equal importance. Boys from poor and middle class families with inborn talents for music, dance and gifted to play the various musical instruments were selected from classes V, VI and VII and kept as boarders at the Centre while they attended a nearby school. Along with their academic studies, they were also given the opportunity to learn the classical forms of dance like *bharathanatyam*, *kuchipudy*, *mohiniyattam* etc., as well as the classical forms of music like the carnatic, and classical instruments like the violin, *mruthangam* etc. from professional teachers. Understandably, the boys had to be of above-average intelligence so that they could manage well both their academic studies and cultural training. The duration of the course extended up to the completion of class X⁹².

In the register of admissions of the centre 568 boys were admitted from 1985 till 2014. In 1985 there were 26 boys, which included also those from previous years. The highest number reached was 42 in 2001. It should further be recalled that at a time there would be three to five batches of boys at the centre⁹³.

In keeping with the distinctive scope of the institution, the daily routine was unlike the one in other Salesian boardings or orphanages. Every day after the Holy Eucharist the boys would have half an hour of yoga practice as a help to keep their bodies agile and supple and had the added advantage of guaranteeing good health, an indispensable asset for practicing the various cultural arts. Classes in the different branches of culture were held on Saturdays and Sundays in addition to three weekday evenings. Moreover, every evening,

⁹⁰ “Write up”, p. 3.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

⁹² “The Scope of Don Bosco, Vennala”, pp. 2-3.

⁹³ HA Vennala, Register of Admissions to the Cultural Centre from 1985 to 2014.

after supper, it was obligatory to devote half an hour to the practice of the different cultural expressions. To create a taste for and develop their poetic talent, the poetry section of the *Children's Bible* was read at meals' time⁹⁴.

In order to realize its specific goals, the Centre was in a position to offer accommodation to more than 100 boys, with sufficient space also for a dance hall, a music hall, and a recording studio. The Centre had at its disposal an auditorium with a seating capacity of more than 2000 on the fifth floor of the press building to stage various Biblical programmes for the public⁹⁵.

The effectiveness of the method followed in the Centre has been proved by the results obtained. Reading and listening to the part in verse of the *Children's Bible* served to nurture their flair for poetry, and many of the boys did prove themselves capable of writing poetry and have also won prizes in school competitions. A number of past pupils have fared well after leaving the institution, winning prizes in dance at State level inter-college competitions; others have taught music in their villages or in cities⁹⁶. Some have also made music their profession as organists, violinists, singers and composers, with the more prominent among them being Wilson K.X., Sangeeth Thomas, Joby K. John, Nelson Peter, Alex A. and Sabu P.S. Joby K. John was the winner of the coveted Idea Star Singer reality show⁹⁷.

Among the various scopes of the Cultural Centre, Fr. Philip also wanted to foster vocations to the priesthood of talented boys so that in due course there would be artistically competent priests, who in later life, would uphold the ideals he was trying to promote. This was a priority for him while recruiting boys. As a result, the Cultural Centre has provided vocations to the Salesian Congregation and to the Church in general. Today, of those who joined different seminaries, there are five diocesan priests (Ernakulam - 3, Gorakpur - 1, Irinjalakuda - 1) and two students of theology from the Diocese of Thamarassery; two religious priests and ten Salesians (5 priests, 4 students of theology and 1 in temporary vows)⁹⁸. This must indeed be considered a singular achievement by any reckoning.

However, being a person who thought out of the box, Fr. Philip had to deal with misunderstandings and criticisms even from among his Salesian confreres regarding the organization and the general running of the house.

⁹⁴ "The Scope of Don Bosco, Vennala", p. 3.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹⁷ Information provided orally by Fr. Mathew Thonikuzhiyil, the present Provincial of INK, who has been several years on the staff of the Cultural Centre, also as Rector of the community.

⁹⁸ HA Vennala, Register of Admissions...

Some of them failed to understand that this institution, unique in its scope of training a special category of boys to fine-tune their God-given cultural talents, had to be organized differently from the “regular” Salesian institutions⁹⁹.

5.2.2.2. Cultural Troupe

At the Cultural Centre, Fr. Philip built up a cultural troupe with boys who were trained well in Indian classical dances and music to give public performances both within the campus and outside it. The programmes inside the campus were held in the auditorium, while for those outside the cultural troupe would accompany by bus the mobile film and library unit on its tours, and give performances based on Biblical themes through the medium of dance and music¹⁰⁰. The cultural troupe of the Centre received the approval even of All India Radio, to which they contributed regular programmes¹⁰¹.

5.2.3. Enthusiast of Media and Communication

5.2.3.1. Mobile Library & Film Unit

From 1984 the Cultural Centre had a bus for the mobile film unit with a 16 mm projector and a mobile library, which used to be also accompanied by the mobile cultural troupe as mentioned above. The bus was fitted with a special body, with due exemption from the proper authorities¹⁰². The mobile unit was begun with the scope of visiting the parishes and schools in Kerala in order to promote scientific and technological knowledge, as well as to spread the Christian message.

The first trip of the mobile library was inaugurated and flagged off by Bishop Dr Joseph Kureethara, in a solemn function at the Santa Cruz Basilica grounds, Fort Cochin, on 2nd October 1989¹⁰³.

Presenting his project of the mobile film and library unit to Fr. Lodovico Zanella, a prospective sponsor in Turin, Fr. Philip explained his *modus*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁰ HA Vennala, Thayil. Letter *Philip Thayil – Lodovico Zanella*, Palluruthy 23 January 1990.

¹⁰¹ “The Scope of Don Bosco, Vennala”, p. 3.

The cultural troupe was active in the initial years of the institution. Later on it was stopped due to practical difficulties. The boys were not able to cope with the task as they were at the same time also continuing their school curriculum.

¹⁰² “Write up”, p. 1.; PAINK G 44 a/2. Correspondence with the Provincial office (1981-1990): letter *Philip Thayil – Vice-provincial*, Vennala 4 May 1984; letter *Provincial – Philip Thayil*, Bangalore 23 May 1984.

¹⁰³ [ANONYMOUS], *Madhyamangal phalapramakanam* [Media should be fruitful] in *Deepika*, 3 October 1989, p. 7.

operandi. He would go to a central place and stay there for a week, showing religious movies in the neighbouring parishes, schools, etc. and lending out books from the mobile library to children. At the end of the week he would collect back the books and proceed to the next place on his list¹⁰⁴.

Fr. Philip started this venture by screening two movies – *Life of Christ* and *Life of St Thomas*. The movie on St Thomas contributed much to spread knowledge of the context in which St Thomas carried out his evangelization work and to promote the ancient tradition of the St Thomas Christians who follow the Syrian liturgical rite.

In 1989, with the help of his benefactors, he paid an advance of Rs. 88,500 for four more films – *Lourdu Matha*, *St Paul*, *Fr. Damian* and *Sankarabharanam* (a commercial movie on classical music)¹⁰⁵. By the following year, he also had a five-seater Standard van for carrying audio-visual equipment and books for the mobile library¹⁰⁶.

The initiative of the mobile film unit was highly appreciated by everyone who had the opportunity to watch the movies screened by Fr. Philip. The responses he received were very positive. The parish priests and heads of institutions, where the movies were screened, hailed the initiative and acknowledged that spreading the Christian message through such media was an effective method for strengthening the faith of the people. One of them, Fr. Thomas Payyappilly, Matha Nagar Church, Cochin, stated on 20 September 1992:

“The movie «*St Thomas*» helped the people of this parish who saw it, to ascend a step higher in their faith, while the film «*Kadinte makkal*» [*Children of the Forest*] was instrumental in creating social consciousness. The parishioners enjoyed both these movies, which imparted to them also knowledge and a deeper faith in Jesus”¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰⁴ HA Vennala, Thayil. Letter *Philip Thayil – Lodovico Zanella*, Palluruthy 23 January 1990.

¹⁰⁵ HA Vennala, Thayil. Receipt from Baby George dated 5 December 1989. The multi-colour 16 mm film “*Life of Christ*” was sponsored by A.K.P. Metals at the cost of Rs. 25,000. “Write up”, p. 4.

¹⁰⁶ HA Vennala, Thayil. Cf “Application for a permit in respect of contract carriage to be regularly so used”, dated 20 August 1990.

¹⁰⁷ HA Vennala, Thayil. Among his files Fr. Philip has preserved a register with the feedback from the places where he conducted his shows. The register contains 26 entries between the years 1989-1994.

When Fr. Philip was transferred in 1989 the film unit also was shifted to Palluruthy, from where it continued to operate. After a few years the service was discontinued.

5.2.3.2. Utilization of Modern Technology

Fr. Philip valued not only classical art forms, but was equally appreciative of the immense potentiality for doing good of the modern means of communication. Hence, he was quick to adopt and integrate these into his evangelization methods.

While at Palluruthy, he started producing audio cassettes on Biblical themes. In the beginning the recordings were done in well-equipped commercial studios. But ever the creative innovator, Fr. Philip drew up plans for a small recording studio of his own at Don Bosco Palluruthy, which, however did not receive the approval of the house council¹⁰⁸. His vision became a reality later at Vennala, where today the studio produces world-class videos and other programmes.

Another of Fr. Philip's aspirations was to bring out a feature film on Don Bosco. To this end, professionals from the film world were contacted and negotiations were initiated with Mr. Sivan, a noted Malayalam film director. Fr. Philip's plan was to produce a 16 mm movie for the use of his mobile unit. Mr. Sivan who was chosen to direct the movie suggested instead to go in for a 35 mm film on the early life of Don Bosco. On 23rd August 1992 the Provincial Council approved the project, with the recommendation to Fr. Philip that he should do the needful for an early realization of the project¹⁰⁹.

The production of the film started in 1993 and was completed the same year. The film, *Johnny*, was directed by Sangeeth Sivan and the cinematography was by Santhosh Sivan. It was of such excellent quality that it bagged the Best Children's Film Award and the Critics' Award in 1994. Later on, Fr. Philip got a 16 mm print of the same prepared for his mobile unit¹¹⁰.

5.2.4. Organic Farming

Fr. Philip's innovative spirit made him wade also into farming. Long before organic farming became popular or even much talked of, Fr. Philip had a flourishing garden at a height of 70 feet on the terrace of the sixth floor of the press building. There he cultivated a variety of vegetables and fruits: drum-sticks, lemons, papayas, banana trees, bitter-gourd, snake-gourds,

¹⁰⁸ "Write up", p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ PAINK F 90 f/2. Letter *Thomas Myladoor – Philip Thayil*, Bangalore 19 September 1992.

¹¹⁰ Prince PUTHANANGADY, *Fr. Philip and Film Johnny in Silver Jubilee Souvenir '08*. Kochi, Don Bosco Vennala 2008, p. 54.

ladies-fingers and beans without the use of large quantities of conventional fertilizers and pesticides.

Already while constructing the building, provisions were made for the vegetable garden on the terrace by making beds, ducts and channels with bricks and mortar. Soil brought from outside was purified of pollutants and used to fill in the beds. The soil was fertilized with bio-fertilizers such as cow-dung and compost. Special arrangements were made to water the plants by sending the water from an overhead tank directly to the plants through a system of pipes¹¹¹. Occasionally he also used a particular type of chemical fertilizer, which he opined was good for stimulating the growth of the plants and thus providing a better yield.

6. An Assessment

Already as an aspirant and a young religious Philip Thayil was endowed with those qualities required to make him a good religious and priest. Though rather advanced in years, at the time of admission to the novitiate and all through the course of his initial formation he was judged to be intelligent and possessing of a practical sense, docile and well-disposed, service-minded and self-sacrificing, a humble worker possessing a solid piety who went about his tasks with the required level of seriousness¹¹². These characteristics, resulting from his family background and training till the age of 29 as well as from his formative years as a Salesian, undoubtedly contributed to forging his personality and making him the person he became.

What is striking about Fr. Philip Thayil is that though a person without high academic qualifications (his academic qualification was just SSLC), and without any special talents (he was not a speaker, writer, poet, musician or artist by any standard), he was daring enough to dream dreams à la Don Bosco whom he admired, loved and tried to imitate. He believed and proved through his creative initiatives that poor, talented (and even the not so talented) kids could be imparted skills and trained to be masters of their trade *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*.

¹¹¹ K. P. NAIR, *Uyarangalile pachakkarithottam* [Vegetable Garden on the Heights], in "Mathrubhumi", 11 January 1988. The author who featured the article was a member of the Farm Information Bureau, Ernakulam.

¹¹² PAINK F 90 f/2. Cf Assessment and admission reports of the various stages of formation.

He had evidently assimilated the pastoral zeal of Don Bosco and imitated him in his creative efforts for the education of the young and for the cultural elevation of the Catholics through the diffusion of good literature. In this he involved a broad section of the people – parish priests of all the three rites, religious sisters, teachers, factory workers including non-Christians, for the distribution and sale of his books. With his contributions to the rural libraries, he was also able to evoke the sympathy and good will of people in general and that irrespective of religious or political affiliations.

Fr. Philip's aim in teaching music and art was not merely to develop the boys' talents or to provide them with a means of livelihood. Instead, it was primarily aimed at spreading the Good News of the Gospel. In the Kerala culture only in the Hindu context religious themes were rendered through the classical forms of performing arts. Fr. Philip was sadly aware that the Catholic community had failed to promote indigenous classical art forms, which though once associated with specific caste groups, were during his time, no more bound by caste or community barriers. He grasped that the Word of God need not only be proclaimed through preaching and writing, but could be presented more attractively and in a more compelling manner through the visual arts. Likewise, he was convinced that poetry lends itself to recitation and memorization more easily than prose. Hence he brought out the *Children's Bible* and *Kindergarten Bible* in verse, with the additional advantage of giving the boys a taste of poetry and preparing them even to compose poems. In this context, it is pertinent to recall that the original name of the institution was "*Don Bosco Biblical Cultural Centre*" with an obvious reference to its intended finality of evangelization through the performing arts.

Fr. Philip was one who trod unbeaten paths. His incisive and innovative approach in the fulfilment of the Salesian mission is evident in the types of apostolate he ventured into on behalf of poor youth. He did not just replicate traditional apostolates and try to realize them through the tried and tested means. Instead, he envisaged novel ways in which he could reach out to a larger section of people. The Cultural Centre envisioned by him was unique in every respect. There was not the like of it anywhere. It was meant for poor Catholic boys, it was meant for boarders who pursued their cultural training along with their school curriculum, and as and when they mastered the arts, they would lend their talents and skills for presenting Bible themes as a means of evangelization.

Founding or managing a publication centre is not in any way a novelty. But Fr. Philip showed his innovative spirit on the one hand by coupling it with imparting training in printing technology, and on the other by the strate-

gies he adopted for marketing the books. In fact two points of his strategy to sell books are quite striking: involving a whole lot of people (priests, religious, teachers, factory workers, bookstalls etc.) in their sale and devising a system whereby families could purchase the books without it becoming a financial burden on them through the 24-month easy instalment scheme which he devised. He was also quite “aggressive” in his marketing technique and often, like Don Bosco, “raced ahead to the point of temerity” to provide beneficial reading materials especially for ensuring the good of the young. He also seemed to have taken advantage of the natural reluctance of people to return the books he had persuaded them to accept with the aim of selling them, without actually making a serious effort to have them sold! Further, his “mobile” cultural troupe, mobile film unit and mobile library were incisive methods for communicating the Gospel message. His was in fact a three-pronged approach – spreading good literature, having a publication centre to supply the required literature and a press to print them.

Some of his publications like *The Children’s Bible* and the *Kindergarten Bible*, meant to be ready-made material for presenting the Word of God through the medium of the performing arts, were nothing short of the exceptional and the result of a unique approach to the propagation of the Gospel.

The feedback he got about his mobile film unit and the gift of books to public libraries demonstrates the impact he had on the people and on society. The religious movies, like for instance the one on St. Thomas, which he projected were well received by the public on account also of their cultural and faith content. Through the donation of books to public libraries, Fr. Philip was able to gain the goodwill and sympathy of many and to establish friendly relations with people of other faiths.

Fr. Philip was an indefatigable worker. Years of hard work in the ambit of the family had prepared him to engage himself in any kind of work, however hard or difficult. It was this spirit of industry and tireless work, which gave him the energy and enthusiasm to go from one project to another. No one with a lesser faith or a lesser passion for the young would venture into so many enterprises as did Fr. Philip. Setting up a press and equipping it, organizing a mobile unit of films and books, constructing a sound-recording studio, preparing audio-cassettes, venturing into the production of a commercial feature film and founding a residential cultural centre which by its very nature called for the mobilization of huge funds, must all be attributed to a holy obsession. All this is particularly remarkable when seen from the fact of his having realized them without having the advantage of an exalted position within the ambit of the Congregation, and quite on his own and that too often

in the face of criticism. For Fr. Philip it was not just a question of having innovative ideas, but being passionately committed and gritty enough to have them implemented.

As in all such cases there were also some reliable friends who believed in him and shared his vision. One such was Fr. Guezou, who with his French benefactors especially Mr. Leon Duhayon¹¹³, was a reliable support, particularly in seeking the necessary funds for the realization of his many projects. Still Fr. Philip must be credited with having garnered financial support from diverse sources by knocking confidently on every possible door – benefactors, superiors (Provincial, Rector Major, ecclesiastics), mission procures, funding agencies, governments and his own friends and relatives. He also tried his best to get tax exemptions and to have customs duties waived or slashed on imported machinery. He was also persevering and persistent in getting permissions from government authorities.

Having had an experience of the life in the world before opting for religious life, he knew the value of money and so proved himself to be sparing and calculating in its use, be it for the projects, for himself or for others. He was also in the habit of personally supervising the construction works in order to economise and to avoid unnecessary spending, even if it meant criticism and of his being accused of a lack of generosity or of wanting in trust in others. Some were also in the habit of saying that he trusted more his lay collaborators than the confreres and that even to the extent of employing them to look after the boarders¹¹⁴. There were also complaints from some of the parents that the boarders were not looked after well enough, especially since the food served them did not appear to be wholesome¹¹⁵. However, like anyone called to be a protagonist, he brushed aside these remarks and moved ahead with trust in God and trusting his own religious instincts.

¹¹³ Leon Duhayon, born at Roubaix in France, was technical director of a wool factory and member of Vincent de Paul Society in Roubaix parish. He became a great friend and benefactor of Fr. Guezou personally and by involving individuals and organizations in France in his charitable initiatives in India. He was so committed to Fr. Guezou's missionary and humanitarian works that he once mortgaged his own house and another time sold his holiday house in the Alps to help him. Cf M. A. KANAGA, *A Man Without Frontiers...*, pp. 169-183.

¹¹⁴ HA Vennala, Thayil. Letter *James A.P – Provincial*, Vennala 9 May 1989. James was a cleric doing studies.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* Letter *M.T. Joseph – Provincial*, Rajapuram 30 September 1989. Mr Joseph was the parent of one of the boys.

7. In Conclusion

As the above narration of his life and activities would clearly indicate, Fr. Philip was a visionary and innovator of a multi-faceted dimension who has left a lasting impact on the Salesian congregation in South India. He has bequeathed to it an unmatched legacy through his incisive contributions in the areas of social communication, printing, art and culture. He dreamt up the unthinkable and accomplished the near impossible, especially given the context of the times and the then available resources.

Don Bosco Cultural Centre and *DB IGACT*, Vennala, Cochin, are a telling witness to the vision, initiative, determination, persevering effort and hard work of one who loved Don Bosco immensely and like him, was willing and capable of initiating innovative projects for the betterment of disadvantaged youth. Through his publications and mobile library, he contributed more than anyone else in making Don Bosco and the Salesian Congregation known and loved in Kerala and in inspiring scores of young men and women from the state to opt for the Salesian way of life. He also contributed to raise the cultural and moral standard of the people by diffusing good literature and through the promotion of music and the performing arts took the first tentative steps to make them attractive and effective means of evangelization.