

Roberto de Nobili

A Brahmin from Montepulciano

The aristocratic Jesuit integrated into the highest caste, to convert through adaptation and dialogue.

When Roberto de Nobili arrived in India, the splendors of his palace in Montepulciano were distant memories. Born in 1577 to Pierfrancesco and Clarice Ceoli, the firstborn of an important family of ancient nobility connected to the Roman Curia, Roberto had expressed his desire to become a priest from a young age. In the face of the family's refusal, he had even run away from home, returning only when his parents had agreed to his chosen path. Between 1596 and 1597, he studied in Naples and became a Jesuit in the prestigious novitiate of the Society of Jesus, where he met Roberto Bellarmine. The Jesuits, founded in 1540 by the Spaniard Ignatius of Loyola, were a distinctly missionary order, dedicated to the reconquest and salvation of souls in the religiously pluralistic Europe and beyond, in the newly discovered or rediscovered world. Their images, as soldiers of Christ committed to converting both ancient and new peoples, reached the devoted Europeans, fueling the desire for missions, martyrdom, or simply a spirit of adventure. It is not surprising, therefore, that by 1601, Roberto expressed his intention to be sent to India. Similarly, the family's opposition should not be surprising either; perhaps it was truly too much for their firstborn, who had already renounced the comforts of secular life and their lineage, to now risk his life by choosing a mission over a serene and tranquil ecclesiastical career at the Roman Curia, perhaps becoming a cardinal, as other family members had done.

Overcoming all resistance, in 1604 Nobili prepared to depart for the East, for Goa, where he arrived ill after a long journey. The experience of estrangement must have been profound: customs, odors, colors, everything was new. In a letter to his aunt, Caterina Nobili Sforza, he compared the encountered novelties to ancient Europe. To his eyes, Maddur  was "a city full of perverse idolaters, as we read it was in that famous city of Rome in ancient times." Having recovered, he was sent to the Malabar province on the southwestern coast, long frequented by the Portuguese, who were not particularly esteemed by the locals. If the Portuguese term "prangui" (or "frangui") was synonymous with violent people, devoid of culture, lacking any civilized values or habits, and identified with another caste, obviously inferior. The opinion formed about Europeans, the disgust they aroused, is well summarized in the following passage from a manuscript: "A race of devils of all kinds, with dirty manners, enemies of God and the Prophet, has arrived in Malabar. They are called Frinijs, worship idols of wood, and prostrate themselves before stone statues hateful in figure and expression of faces. They have blue eyes like the Ghouls (desert ghosts), urinate like dogs, violently deviate pure men from their religion, are experienced in sea voyages, in tumults, and in frauds." In Malabar, Nobili found his fellow Jesuit Gonalo Fernandes Trancoso (1541-1621), a Portuguese who, after many years in those places, had failed to convert anyone and was unable to find a way to make inroads into Indian society. And here began his extraordinary intellectual adventure.

The years in which Nobili had nurtured his desire to go to the "pagans" and "idolaters" of the East were the same years in Europe when people heard about the great successes that the Jesuits had begun to achieve in China. There, Matteo Ricci, dressed as a mandarin with silk clothes, long beard, and uncut nails unusual for the West, had reached the imperial court. Nobili decided to take the

same path, dedicating himself to the systematic and profound study of the local culture, language, sacred texts, customs, with the aim of adapting, assimilating himself to become Indian in order to be authoritative and gain credibility. Through the intense study of local classical languages, so deep that it made him forget, as he often writes, his native language, and the sacred texts of the Brahmins, Nobili learned that it was unthinkable to convert India by adopting traditional missionary techniques such as forced baptisms and violent destruction of Hindu temples without understanding the profound divisions present in Indian society and the absolute rejection refusal of the higher castes to engage with the lower ones.

The noble and aristocratic Jesuit decided to dress like the Brahmins, the highest caste, responsible for ceremonial functions and cultural leadership. He wore the long yellow-orange linen robe of an Indian penitent, a turban on his shaved head, and wooden sandals. He adopted certain protest signs of the caste, such as the kudumi (a tied lock of hair indicating social belonging), punul (a triple-thread cord hanging over the shoulder), and santal (a mark on the forehead made with sandalwood paste). However, actions speak louder than words, and for Nobili, it was not just about conforming to the external signs of Brahmin sannyasis.

To avoid being identified as Portuguese, an untouchable foreigner, Nobili began abstaining from eating meat and drinking wine. He adopted a daily diet of rice, legumes, milk, and water, embracing a truly Indian lifestyle by practicing ablutions and meditation. Furthermore, he had a house with a private chapel built in the Brahmin quarter. It was said that there was not a single cross displayed, and he rarely received visitors to avoid distraction from meditation and the study of sacred texts. Finally, he refused to associate with the pariahs and visit their homes to avoid becoming untouchable and gain acceptance from the Brahmin caste.

This form of disguise was a practice already employed by Jesuits in other parts of the world, adopting the customs of those they sought to convert, going naked among the indigenous people of the forests or wearing silk among Eastern civilizations. According to Nobili's strategy, this way, conversion to Catholicism could never be interpreted as becoming Portuguese and of lower caste. Having overcome the initial obstacle by asserting his identity as an Italian noble belonging to a second-tier caste to avoid any association with the Portuguese, he took another step.

In contrast to the Christianity of the modern age, which advanced with armies, temple destruction, and forced conversions, Nobili proposed a peaceful method based on knowledge, adaptation, and dialogue. This method sparked debates and accusations in India and Europe. Was Nobili truly spreading the Gospel, or was it a syncretic practice? The adoption of some Indian social practices would become a crucial issue for Christianity in India in the decades that followed, especially concerning the adaptation practiced by the Jesuits (the so-called Malabar rites), leading to one of the longest and most controversial disputes in the history of Christianity.

Nobili not only adopted an Indian identity but also allowed converted Brahmins to forgo certain Christian signs deemed unacceptable in light of their culture. This adaptation yielded excellent results, with hundreds of converts following Nobili, in contrast to the initial reservations of Brother Gonçalvo. The success, however, gave rise to the first criticisms from missionaries in India and Brahmins themselves. Missionaries accused him of illicit compromises with paganism, confusion between Christian and Indian doctrines, unauthorized changes to the catechism taught in missions, and, most importantly, allowing converts to retain pagan customs. Brahmins, on the other hand, accused him of corrupting Indian law, being an atheist, and setting a bad example. Despite these

criticisms, his revolution was a reality: he first detached his identity, and that of the missionaries, from Portuguese affiliation; then he demonstrated that Brahminism was a social system, not religious, and that Brahmins were not priests. In summary, he argued that converts could not be forced into a complete break with their world, running the risk of frightening them and thus losing them; for this reason, it was necessary to earn the sympathy of the Brahmins, following a procedure already sanctioned by Christ and the apostles, who knew how to adapt to the Jewish and Roman worlds to disseminate their doctrine. In dedicating himself to a selective preaching, respectful of caste customs, Nobili moved away from the universality of the evangelical message, but he was convinced that he had found a first opening to enter India. Let us not delve into the tangle of accusations directed at Nobili for decades, which historians often attribute to the sharp opposition between Italian and Portuguese missionaries (and the military and imperial ideology of the latter) and the rivalries between religious orders engaged in India, and instead look at Nobili's fate.

Those must have been truly difficult years, as evidenced by some of his letters requesting help from family members. He was denounced to the Inquisition in Goa and put to the test by measures that alternately prevented or authorized his preaching, at least until 1623 when Pope Gregory XV (Alessandro Ludovisi), prompted by Nobili's maternal cousin, Cardinal Francesco Sforza, brought an end to the complex issue by partly siding with Nobili in the constitution *Romanae Sedis antistes*, in which he declared to consider the *punul* and *kudumi* as distinctive social signs. Meanwhile, a new change had taken place in Nobili's life as he abandoned the external signs of belonging to the high castes and began to travel around the Madura region promoting a new image of himself: that of a teacher of truth, an ascetic missionary, and penitent who could address all castes without incurring the censure of the Brahmins. But even in this case, accusations, misunderstanding, and imprisonment awaited him.

Old and sick, he withdrew to the college of Djafnapatnam and then to that of Meliapoor, where he spent the last years of his life composing works in Tamil for missionaries. He died on January 16, 1656, after describing Indian culture and indicating the path of dialogue between different cultures by identifying a common core to start from. In his self-defense, known as the *First Apology – Responsio ad ea quae modum quo nova Missio madurensis utitur ad ethnicos Christo convertendos obiecta sunt* (1610) – and even more in his *Informatio de quibusdam moribus nationis indicae* (1613), *Narratio fundamentorum quibus Madurensis missionis institutum caeptum est, et hucusque consistit* (1619), and *De linea Brachmanum*, he was a fine and great orientalist who illustrated to the Jesuits and Europeans, always curious about world news, the social structure of India, the role of the Brahmins, their studies and teaching, their sects, and customs. The skill shown in translating theological and philosophical concepts into Tamil marks his role as the inventor and progenitor of prose in this language that Nobili of Montepulciano exercised by writing on fragile palm leaves.

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