

ELEMENTS OF SYRO-MALABAR HISTORY

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Beth Aprem Nazrani Dayra
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Preface

Beth Aprem Nazrani Dayra is established in the Eparchy of Palai between Kuravilangad and Kaduthuruthy in order to promote Christian Aramaic (Syriac) studies and to live East-Syrian monastic spirituality. All are welcome there for the prayer life and studies (with prior intimation). This is the second booklet published from there. I express my cordial thanks to my brother Jose Kurian for the idea and sponsorship of this booklet. I am grateful to Sunish George and Thalikaasthanath Thoma Mathai for its publication.

Koonammakkal Thoma Kathanar

ELEMENTS OF SYRO-MALABAR HISTORY

Introduction

Contacts between Mediterranean world, Mesopotamia, Persia and India began before fourth millennium BC. During the third and second millennium BC Indus valley and Sumer had very flourishing civilisations. Ancient tablets discovered from Ur the home town of the ancestors of Abraham indicates the existence of trade between Sumer and Indus valley. The Brahmi script of India and Sumerian are related. Gradually Dravidians from the Indus Valley were pushed to the south and north India underwent Arianization. The contacts between Phoenicia and South India go back to second millennium BC. Jews came into contact with south India in the tenth century BC following the commercial enterprises of Solomon. They were following the footsteps of Phoenicians from the Tsur and Sidon. The king Hiram of Tsur, the contemporary of Solomon (972-932 BC) promoted international trade with South Indian Coast. Spices like pepper, ginger, precious gems, ivory, gold, peacocks, apes etc. were exotic attractions from South India. According to Koder, the first Jewish colony of South India goes back to the days of King Solomon¹. After Solomon, Jews underwent the exiles in Assyria in 734-732 BC and Babylonia in sixth and fifth centuries BC. Gradually the deported Jews began to engage in international commerce especially with South India. Ordinary Jews forgot Hebrew and became speakers of Aramaic, the language of international trade. Babylon of this period was the greatest international market of the world. It was dependent and related to South India by sea route which extended even up to southern China.

In the seventh century BC South India served as meeting point between traders from East and West. Teakwood, sandal, rice, and other articles mentioned above were fascinating items in this trade. Teakwood from South India had been excavated in the Moon temple of Ur. Palace of Nebuchadenazzar (604-562 BC) was decorated with Indian wood². Babylonian captivity of the Jews was terminated by Persian emperor Cyrus in 539 BC. But many of the Jews interested in international commercial enterprises remained in Babylon. Some of them settled in Malabar Coast³. Jewish exiles of Assyria were scattered among many peoples and countries. Some of them got settled in different parts of India. These two groups of exilic Jews were Aramaic speakers. In the second and first centuries BC, another group of Jews migrated to South India. So we see a pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic Jewish emigration in South India.

The Roman army conquered Egypt in 30 BC and took over the control of international commerce through Egypt. 120 ships used to sail every year from Red sea to the Malabar Coast. Within 40 days the Monsoon winds brought them to the Coast. With the help of opposite Monsoons these ships used to return to Egypt in the same year. Emperors Augustus (27 BC-14 AD) and Tiberius (14-37 AD) promoted trade between Egypt and Malabar Coast. More than 500 coins of Augustus have been discovered in South India. The coins of Emperor Tiberius from South India number over 1000. These are clear indication of the flourishing trade in the first century BC and the first century AD. The Persian, Arab, and the Egyptian navigators already knew the course of Monsoon winds. These already-existing knowledge was “discovered” by the Greek Hippalus. Thus a long kept secret was divulged

¹ S. S. Koder, Kerala and her Jews, (Ernakulam 1965), p.2; IKg 9:26-28, 10:22.

² J. Kennedy “Early commerce of Babylon and India”, JRAS, 1898.

³ S. S. Koder, op.cit, p.4.

probably during the reign of Ptolemy Euergetes (146-116 BC). Later the so-called discovery of Hippalus was divulged to Romans in the first half of the first century AD. According to Peutinger tablets from the second century AD Egypt, there is a temple of Augustus at Muziris near modern Kodungallur region⁴. The new discoveries from the archaeological excavations of Pattanam (a part of ancient Muziris) in 2007 have necessitated the rewriting of the history of Malabar Coast⁵. Naturally many Aramaic speaking Jewish settlers and traders were in Malabar Coast during this period. Roman trade expansion accelerated the presence of Jewish settlers and traders. Their forefathers were already familiar with Aramaic even in the pre-exilic period as we hear from many Old Testament texts. Alexander's invasion of India resulted in further cultural and commercial contacts. An offshoot of official Aramaic (circa. 700-300 BC) appeared as Biblical Aramaic (Gen. 31:47, Jer. 10:18, Dan. 2:4-7:28, Ezra 4:8-6:8, 7:12-26). Edicts of Ashoka (272-232 BC) have been discovered in middle Aramaic (circa. 300 BC onwards) from Afghanistan. Then we find late Aramaic from which Christian Aramaic or Syriac, Targumic Aramaic developed. Finally, modern Aramaic appeared by 14th century AD⁶.

The apostles of Jesus Christ were commanded to bring the message of the gospel to scattered Jews living in different parts of the world. The Apostle Thomas undertook his first mission throughout the Persian region (including North West India) where he found many Aramaic speaking Jewish communities. In AD 50 he undertook the second mission which was prompted by the Aramaic speaking Jewish settlements of South India. Jews of the Malabar Coast readily accepted the message of the gospel. It is surprising that the seven Christian communities established by him were in the vicinity of Jewish settlements. Most of the then Aramaic-speaking Jews became Christians. The arrival of Thomas on the Malabar Coast was guided by the Jewish merchant Habban. The apostle was received and recognised first by a Jewish flute girl in the Chera royal capital. All these we hear from the first Acts of Thomas composed in the late second or early third century. Song of Ramban (revised and simplified in the year 1601 AD) also supports this. It speaks of 40 families of Jews converted by Thomas in the royal capital. Similarly he might have converted other Jewish settlements of Malabar. In AD 70 the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem temple and the Jews were scattered. Some of them came to settle in the Malabar Coast. The Bar Cochba war (AD 132-35) resulted in other series of Jewish emigration to South India. Gradually they all became St Thomas Christians. Meanwhile their language Aramaic evolved into Christian Aramaic or Syriac. So there was a Judeo-Christian and Aramaic connection and continuity between the Persian Church and the South Indian Church right from the very beginning. This is how Christian Aramaic or Syriac became the liturgical language of St Thomas Christians. It was not at all later import by anybody as it is propagated by some interested groups. There was a cordial relation between the St Thomas Christians and Jewish settlers until the European colonialists came to the scene. The *Pesaha* celebration, ablutions, purifications after death, Aramaisms of their Syriac, purification of mother and child after child birth, the beginning and end of the day in the typical Jewish fashion, all point towards the Judeo-Christian roots of the past. Old Testament names were very popular among the St Thomas Christians which annoyed Portuguese missionaries. There were no statues or even pictures in the Churches of St Thomas Christians which might be a latent Jewish heritage as well as East Syrian tradition. Christians of Kaduthuruthy closed their eyes in anger and anguish as they were shown a statue of Blessed Mary. They admit only the cross in their Churches⁷.

⁴ G. F. Hourani, Arab sea fairing in the Indian ocean in ancient and medieval times, (Beirut 1963), pp. 24ff.

H. G. Rawlingson, Intercourse between and the western world, (Cambridge 1916), pp. 121.

⁵ The Hindu, December 9, 2009, pp. 18, May 16, 2010 pp. 24, March 14, 2011, pp.18, October 26, 2011, pp.8.

⁶ "Aramaic", Encyclopaedia Judaica, 2nd ed., vol. 2, 342-353.

⁷ P. Malekandathil, ed., Jornada of Dom De Menezes (Kochi 2003), pp.237, 190, 244, 245.

The relation between South Indian Church and Persian Church goes back to the days of Apostle Thomas. The Persian Church was the fruit of his first mission. His second mission resulted in the emergence of St Thomas Christians in South India. These two Churches were culturally and linguistically connected. These relations continued ever since. In the late third century Mar David of Basra came to South India to help the St Thomas Christians. During the persecutions of Christians in the Persian Empire many Christian communities immigrated to South India and merged with the St Thomas Christians. In the fifth and sixth centuries some Indian Christian students and scholars had been associated with the School of Edessa and Nisibis. The series of Persian Christian migrations took place between fourth and ninth centuries to Malabar because of Persian and Islamic persecutions. One of the latest of these groups became Southists because of the appearance of caste system which was unheard of among the St Thomas Christians. By seventh century hierarchical intervention of Selucia-Ctesiphon took over. Until then South India had hierarchical relations with the Persia proper. By ninth century this takeover was complete. It was voluntary undertaking from the part of St Thomas Christians rather than an imposition by the Persians or East Syrians. The Church of St Thomas Christians was more congregational than Episcopal. The ruling authority was in the hands of *Palliyogam* presided by the Archdeacon and the Gate of all India. Bishop was only a spiritual and monastic head for them⁸.

All the manuscripts burned by Diamper indicate that the Church of St Thomas Christians was theologically, spiritually, liturgically, canonically an East Syrian Church. The famous library and Episcopal archives of Angamaly were systematically burned. Menezes visited and burned Syriac books in at least 59 Churches. After Angamaly library, the Syriac collections of Cheppadu and Chengannur which were also burned, were the most prominent ones. Individual collections of all parishes too underwent this or similar misfortune. Evidently this is the greatest tragedy of Saint Thomas Christians' spiritual heritage. One can compare it only to the destruction of the Alexandrian library by the Muslim conquerors in 641 AD. Angamaly collection built up over many centuries was the most important intellectual centre of Saint Thomas Christians who had a theological University there. We do not find practically any historical record or document concerning the pre-Portuguese history of Saint Thomas Christians. So we depend on the testimony of non-Indian authors to describe the situation of this apostolic Christian community.

Select Patristic Testimonies

Herewith I give only a few sample opinions of some of the Syriac, Greek and Latin Fathers who speak of the mission of Apostle Thomas in India or an apostolic origin of Indian Christianity. An exhaustive patristic view on the issue is out of my scope.

1. Pantaenus

There are two texts associated with this scholar of the second century Alexandria. Both of them adequately attest the existence of apostolic Christianity in India in the second century. Moreover they possess a gospel text written in the spoken language of Jews popularly called Hebrew, but in fact Aramaic. Pantaenus the head of the Alexandrian school is said to have visited South Indian Christians about the year 190 AD at the invitation by the Indians. He found among them a gospel text which he brought back to Alexandria. Eusebius the Father of Church History (V, 10, 3) writes in the fourth century "Pantaenus is said to have gone among the Indians, where as is reported, He found the gospel according to

⁸ For further details see my article "Judeo-Christian and Patristic roots of St. Thomas Christians" in Mar Thoma Margam, ed. A Mekkattukunnel, (Vadavathoor 2012), pp. 71-72.

Matthew among some people there who had already acquired some knowledge of Christ before his arrival. For Bartholomew, one of the Apostles, had preached to them and had left them these writing of Matthew in the Hebrew (Aramaic) language, which they had preserved till then.” Biblical scholar Jerome writes, “Pantaenus, a Stoic philosopher, renowned as an outstanding scholar, was sent to India by Demetrius, the Bishop of Alexandria to preach Christ to the Brahmans and the philosophers of that nation. And he found there that Bartholomew, one of the twelve Apostles, had preached the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the gospel of Matthew.” (Ep. 70).

2. Acts of Judas Thomas (early 3rd century)

This apocryphal work speaks of Thomas’ mission in North West India (including Parthia proper) and South India. Legends and traces of history are rolled together in this work. But the kernel of the mission stories originated in South India which was reported back to Edessa. The double mission of Thomas is made into a single Indian mission.

3. Origen (c.185-254 AD)

“The holy Apostles and disciples of our Saviour were scattered throughout the whole world, Thomas, as tradition relates, obtained by lot Parthia,...”⁹ The first mission of Thomas is what is meant here. Parthia is North West India during that period. The Mauryan empire of India comprised also Afghanistan and parts of Iran, which was later broken up as Indo-Parthian kingdoms. The Alexandrian tradition reported by Origen does not distinguish between the first (North West Indian) and second (South Indian) missions of Thomas.

4. The Doctrine of the Apostles (3rd cent)

This 3rd century Syriac apocryphal work writes: “India and all its own countries, and those bordering on it, even to the farthest sea, received the Apostle’s hand of Priesthood from Judas Thomas, who was Guide and Ruler in the church which he built and ministered there.”¹⁰ This fact is confirmed by the oral traditions of India, especially those behind Ramban Song.

5. Clementine Recognitions (3rd cent).

This third century work speaks about the first or Parthian mission of Apostle Thomas. “As Thomas wrote to us, among the Parthians to whom he preached the Gospel, polygamy is disappearing” (evidently due to Christian influence)¹¹

6. Ephrem (c.306-373)

He is the greatest of Syriac authors, poets and theologians. According to him India is the mission field of Thomas who died and was buried there. The relics of Thomas were brought to Edessa by a Christian merchant. Miracles take place in India where his tomb is, and at Edessa. In his Nisibian Hymns (written between the years 360-365) hymn number 42 Ephrem writes on this in great detail. The passages are too long to be quoted.

⁹ K.Lake, Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History III, I (London 1959), I, p.191.

¹⁰ W.Cureton, Ancient Syriac Documents (London 1864, repr. Amsterdam 1967), p.33.

¹¹ PG I,1415.

7. Gregory of Nazianzus (c.329-c.390)

This Greek Father writes about the apostles: “Were not the Apostles aliens among the many nations and countries entrusted to them? ... What had Paul in common with the gentiles, Luke with Achaea, Andrew with Epirus, John with Ephesus, THOMAS WITH INDIA, Mark with Italy?”¹²

8. Cyrillona (late 4th cent)

This gifted Syriac poet speaks of the mission of Thomas in India: “Behold THOMAS TEACHES IN INDIA, and Simon preaches in Rome”¹³

9. Ambrose of Milan (c.335-397)

Ambrose the Latin Father mentions India as the field of Thomas: ‘As the Lord Jesus said to the Apostles, ‘Go and teach all nations,’ even the kingdoms closed by rugged mountains were open to them, AS INDIA TO THOMAS...’¹⁴

10. John Chrysostom (347-407)

This Greek Father speaks about the apostolic origin of Indian Christianity: “(The Apostles) erected altars in the land of Romans, Persians, Scythians, Moors, INDIANS”.¹⁵ He alludes to the well-known tomb of Thomas (in India).

11. Gaudentius of Brescia (+c.410)

“It is said that John (the Baptist) finished his course in Sebaste, a town in the province of Palestine, THOMAS AMONG THE INDIANS, Andrew and Luke in the city of Patras in Achaea”.¹⁶ He had their relics deposited in one of his churches. He alludes to the martyrdom and burial of Thomas in India.

12. Jerome (c.345-c.419)

The scholarly Latin Father writes: “As it is handed down to us by tradition, apostle Thomas preached the Lord’s gospel to the Parthians, Medes, Persians, Carmans, Hyrcanians, Bactrians and the Magians. HE SLEPT IN THE CITY OF CALAMINA, WHICH IS IN INDIA”.¹⁷ Jerome continues: “(Jesus) was present in all the places WITH THOMAS IN INDIA, with Peter in Rome, with Paul in Illyria, with Titus in Crete, with Andrew in Achaea, with each apostle in each and every country”.¹⁸

13. Paulinus of Nola (353-431)

This Latin poet speaks about the mission of the apostles in various countries: “Thus he gave care of Patras to Andrew, To John that of Ephesus along with Europe and Asia, Their

¹² Oratio 33, Contra Arianos 11, PG 36, 228.

¹³ C.Vona, I Carmi di Cirillona (Rome 1963), p.151.

¹⁴ Ennaratio in Ps 45, PL 14, 1143.

¹⁵ Quod Christus sit Deus 6; cf.Homily 4, NPNF XI, p.29.

¹⁶ Sermo 17, PL 20, 963.

¹⁷ De Vitis Apostolorum 5, PL 23, 721B.

¹⁸ Epist.59 Ad Marcellam, CSEL 54, 546.

dire darkness to dispel with the brightest light, Parthia embraces Matthew, AS INDIA DOES THOMAS”,¹⁹

14. Jacob of Sarug (451-521)

This great Syriac poet-theologian describes the mission and martyrdom of Thomas in India in three long metrical homilies.²⁰ Living close to Edessa he had easy access to the Edessan traditions regarding Thomas.

15. Gregory of Tours (538-594)

“It is said in the history of his martyrdom, that the Apostle Thomas suffered martyrdom in India... His blessed body was taken out after a long time and transferred to a city called Edessa by the Syrians and was interred there. In that part of India where it first rested stands a monastery and a church of striking dimensions, well decorated and structured. Now, it is in this edifice that God shows a great miracle. The fire kept burning there before the tomb of the Apostle shines without fail day and night by divine will, without anyone supplying oil or twig... This has been narrated to me by Theodore, who personally visited the place.”²¹

16. Gregory the Great (c.540-604)

Pope (590-604) and Latin theologian speaks of the Apostle Thomas; “At night, the Lord appeared to Thomas in a vision and told him: Don’t fear to go to India.”²² In the second coming of Christ Peter will appear with converts from Judea, Paul with his Gentile converts, Andrew with Achaea, John with Asia, THOMAS WITH INDIA.²³

17. Isidore of Seville (560-636)

Last of the Latin Fathers writes: “This Thomas preached to the Parthians, Medes, Persians, Hyrcanians, Bactrians, and to the INDIANS OF THE ORIENTAL REGION. He sealed his preaching by his passion. Transfixed with a lance, he died at Calamina, a city in India where he was buried with honour”²⁴.

THE SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH

The name Syro-Malabar is a misnomer invented and given by Rome in 1887 when the oriental catholic St Thomas Christians were separated from Latin or Roman Catholics of India. The term Syro stands for Syriac or Christian Aramaic the liturgical language of the community until 1968. The appendage Malabar is only the Syriac rendering of Malankara the traditional name of the Church. Ever since the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498 St Thomas Christians were unofficially and informally leaning towards communion with Rome, though with some reluctance and resistance when they realized the loss of Syriac heritage. Since this is a debated issue among various groups I do not discuss it here. But officially imposed communion began with Diamper in 1599 and this lasted until Koonan Cross Oath in 1653.

¹⁹ CSEL30, 1894, carmen 19.

²⁰ W.Strothmann, Jakob von Sarug: Drei Gedichte ueber den Apostel Thomas in Indien (Wiesbaden 1976).

²¹ *Miraculorum libri.I. De gloria martyrum*, I, 507-508. PL 71, 733.

²² *Liber Responsorialis*, PL 78, 819C.

²³ *Homil.in Evang.*1,17,17.

²⁴ *De ortu et obitu patrum*, 74, 132, PL 83, 152C.

Following the Oath we find two groups (Pazhayakur in communion with Rome and Puthenkur in communion with Antioch), but both groups following the same latinizations of Diamper. Antiochean traditions and West Syriac were introduced very gradually among the Puthenkur.

In this short essay it is impossible to give the details about the emergence of the present Syro Malabar Church which got liberated from the interim jurisdiction of Portuguese Padroado and Propaganda of Rome. But more can be learned from the chronicle given below. 400 years of struggle for identity, native bishops, Syriac liturgical spirituality and local Indian traditions, should be seen behind. By 1896 the period of alienation and foreign rule is over, but at a great cost and as result of many struggles for native rule. But what we find at the end is an oriental and Indian Church latinized to the very core. Instead of liturgical spirituality, a group of Latin and Occidental devotions like rosary, veneration of statues, various novenas, way of the cross, adoration of Eucharist took over and the latter serve to nourish the spiritual needs of Catholic Nazranis. So there is an ongoing inner tension to recover, restore, renew from within. At present it has a hybrid nature because of Western influence. But who can forget the tremendous spiritual and material progress of Syro-Malabar Church ever since 1896? Who can also neglect the fact that some seventy five percent of the Roman or Latin Catholic missionary personnel in India even today comes from the Syro-Malabar Church? Who can overlook the original apostolic credentials of this Indian Church with Syriac spiritual heritage?

16th Century

In the first half of the 16th century cordial relations between Portuguese missionaries and Thomas Christians existed to some extent. But already we find elements of friction because of the Latinizing efforts of many missionaries. It is clear that during this period the communion with Roman Catholic Church was introduced without much opposition from the part of Nazranis. Many of the East Syrian bishops were influenced and forced to do this. But surprise and fascination gave way to anxiety and worry during the second half of the 16th century as Latinization began to destroy the East Syriac traditions. In 1552 a group of East Syrians of Mesopotamia established communion with Rome under Mar Sulaqa. Since then East Syrian bishops belonging to both groups seem to have come to Malabar Coast and Nazranis were ready to accept any East Syrian bishop without prejudice to their communion. Gradually we find highhanded Latinization and open resistance. The climax of this we see in the so-called Diamper Synod (1599) which was illicit and invalid from the viewpoint of Nazranis.

17th Century

Latinizing policies of Jesuit Bishops who took over the Church of St Thomas Christians ended up in a tragic split within the community. Bishops Francis Roz (1599-1624), Stephen Brito (1624-1641) and Francis Garcia (1641-1659) were responsible for this predicament. The role of the Arkadiacon was belittled and neglected. The once All India jurisdiction of an Apostolic and Catholic Church was reduced to a small corner. East Syriac connections were declared heretical by the European missionaries. This eventually led to the Koonan cross oath of 1653 at Mattancherry. Koonan cross oath is interpreted as declaration of independence from colonizing intruders. It was not a rebellion against Rome, but against the Jesuits. That is why most of the Nazranis came again under Rome through Carmelites sent by Propaganda. The Carmelites came as a commission for reconciliation in 1655. But Sebastiani

their leader came back as bishop of *Pazhayakur* (Old party) in 1661. When the Dutch captured Kochi in 1662 Sebastiani was forced to consecrate Parambil Chandy, the native leader of the Pazhayakur. Unfortunately after him no native was given episcopal consecration and Pazhayakur fell prey to double jurisdiction under Padroado and Propaganda. Pazhayakur under Rome became more and more latinized, whereas Puthenkur (New party) underwent Antiochianization (Jacobitism) and a gradual polarization. Puthenkur began to accept West Syrian liturgy after 1665, at first with resistance. This transition of Puthenkur from East Syriac to West Syriac tradition is very gradual.

18th Century

Troubles for Nazranis began to abound under the Carmelites and Propaganda. A series of reunion efforts between Puthenkur and Pazhayakur were thwarted by Carmelite missionaries. In 1778 the Pazhayakur sent Kariyattil Yausep Malpan and Paremmakkal Thoma Kathanar to Lisbon and Rome for reunion of Puthenkur. Their miseries, adventures and achievements are recorded in *Varthamanapusthakam* written in 1786. Kariyattil was consecrated as archbishop in 1783. But he expired in Goa under dubious circumstances and foul play. To pacify the anger of Nazranis, Paremmakkal was tolerated as Administrator. These two heroic and saintly sons of Pazhayakur wrote a glorious chapter towards reunion and identity of the Church. A noble layman Thachil Mathu Tharakan did his best for Nazrani reunion. Though reunion took place in 1799 it fell apart due to the apathy and intrigues.

19th Century

After the rule of Paremmakkal the Pahayakur fell between Padroado and Propaganda. When Padroado was abolished in 1838 they all came under Propaganda. But the fire of self-rule fanned by *Varthamanapusthakam* did not die out. Two heroic leaders of Nazranis were Kudakkachira Anthony Kathanar and Nidhirikal Mani Kathanar of legendary fame. Arrival of two Chaldean bishops Rokos (1861-1862) and Mellus (1874-1882) created a furore and Padroado got restored in 1864. Repeated petitions centred around Mananam resulted in ousting the so-called Seven Dolours (Ezhu Vyakulungal). All these brought about a kind of end to Carmelite rule over Nazranis in 1887 and finally by 1896.

TRADITIONS IMMEMORIAL

Concept of the Church

St Thomas Christians held on to original, primitive, apostolic teachings of the pre-Nicene period. Church is the worshipping community keeping the Way of Jesus brought to India by Apostle Thomas. Church is called "*Palli*", a Buddhist term for believing community. For St Thomas Christians Church is not at all a building or place of worship; instead it is an assembly of people. When they say St Thomas established seven Churches in Malabar Coast they do not primarily mean that he built seven buildings as places of worship; rather they intend that he gathered seven communities who were to come together to a spot symbolized by *Sliva*. The term *Sliva* in Syriac means the CRUCIFIED ONE. Victory of the Crucified one became symbol of Christianity every where. In the second and third century Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles erection of a Cross by the Apostle missionary is a common item. Naturally St Thomas too erected Seven Crosses so that community could come together to it for worship. Later on the worshipping assembly (*Palli* or Church) itself got identified with the place or building. Buddhism and Jainism were the most popular religions of South India when Thomas

came here. Sometimes we find the appellation of Buddha for Christ and St Thomas; also Mar Thoma Nazranis were termed Buddhists. These we find in the post-Sankara period. Until the Southists got separated from the Northists, sometime between 8th and 10th century the Christian community was only one. The Northists joined the St Thomas Christians and the latter too began to be called Northists because of polarization of some bitter division within one and the same community. The caste system developed by the time of Sankaracharya influenced this separation. Those who broke the rule went out as outcastes.

Margam

Those who became the followers of the Way (*Margam*) of Jesus Christ through the Way (Margam) of St Thomas the Apostle (Mar Thoma Shliha) used to say to their children: “We are the children of St Thomas the Apostle” (*Njangal mar thoma shlihayude makkal aakunnu*). Traditionally they were called Mar Thoma Nazranis. The name Nazranis is a very popular name for those who follow Jesus the Nazarene. In the pre-sixth century Syriac literature we find it, for example in the writings of Ephrem (c.306-373). It stood for Christians with a Judeo-Aramaic background. With the arrival of Islam on the scene it became rather derogatory in the Mesopotamian milieu. But the term remained very popular and acceptable in India. It is the European travellers who came across these Malankara Mar Thoma Nazranis, who began to call them St Thomas Christians of Malabar. With the arrival of European Latin missionaries the term Syrian Christians came to everyday use to distinguish the Nazranis from Latin Christians.

Administration

The Church or *Palli* was ruled by *Palliyogam*, a democratic group of elders on the local, regional and national level. It was a decision making body of elders presided over by the eldest priest. On the national level it was called Malankara Yogam which was presided over by the Arkadiacon of All India who enjoyed the status of a Christian prince and ruler. His voice was final for the Christians. The bishop remained a pastoral and spiritual head who usually left the administration of the Church to the Arkadiacon and Palliyogam. Church was more congregational than Episcopal. Bishops came from Persia and Mesopotamia and they did not interfere in the day to day worldly administration of the Church. Local leaders were efficient and happy to play such a role. All important matters of individual members, priests and community were discussed and decided by *Palliyogam*. Some European travellers describe this system as “a Christian Republic”. It was local apostolic tradition that grew up into the rule of *Palliyogam*. Participation and co-operation of the laity was paramount in *Palliyogam*. But during the Latinization period (1498-1896) this self-governing system got very weakened and redundant among Catholic groups. Among non-catholic groups it became a platform of battle between laity and clergy. At present the *Palliyogam* of the Syro-Malabar Church is an advisory rather than a decision making body. The role of the Arkadiacon has disappeared among the Catholic and non-Catholic groups.

Priests were ordained for a community with the written permission of *Palliyogam*. The community gave financial contributions and gifts to support their clergy. Though most of the clergy were married some priests remained celibate monks who were respected as Rambans and Malpans. The wedge between laity and clergy was unheard of; in and through *Palliyogam* they were equal partners. Future priests were trained in the pastoral and liturgical context of important parishes by select Malpans. Kammiz was the clerical dress worn only on

official and liturgical occasions. Otherwise the married priests dressed like the laity and lived in their own families. But celibate Rambans and Malpans used to put on black dress. Usually priests earned their living by personal labour like the laity though they received contributions from the community they served. Celibacy and seminary system were introduced only in the 16th century by European missionaries.

Agape

Local native customs and cultural elements were harmoniously blended together with Christian faith. Agape of Apostolic times is kept up even today to some extent. Different food items (eg. Food *nerchas* like *razakanji*, *thamuku*, *kozhukkatta*, *kallappam*, *neyyappam*, *unniyappam*, *aval*, *kanji*, *rice*, *pachor*, *puzhuku*, etc.), were offered and distributed in the Church. All are eager to participate in this kind of sacred meal in or around the Church in connection with worship. Both rich and poor, young and old offer and share this *nercha* agape. One tenth (*passaram*) of wealth was offered to the common needs of the Church. *Muthiyutt* and *Kal kazhukiyutt* were also widely practised at homes. In *Muthiyutt* a little boy, an old lady and an old man (representing child Jesus, Mary and Joseph) were given a sumptuous meal. *Kal kazhukiyutt* involves feeding twelve boys and a priest (representing the twelve Apostles and Jesus). In some villages we observe these even today.

Fasting

On fasting days of Lent and advent Nazranis used to take only a single meal after the evening prayers. All those who were staying near the Church came for evening and morning prayers. Some came even for the midnight prayers. Those who were far away made these three prayers at home. Even children were woken up for midnight prayers. Many pious Nazranis ate only a few pieces of “*indari*” and “*kozhukatta*” from Maundy Thursday (Pesaha) until the following Saturday evening. Many kept silent vigil during these days. Even children were to keep silence; if at all they speak only in a very small voice. Some used to sit in the Church (*bhajanamirickal*) on these days and other important days of fasting. There were some who did not eat anything for Three Days Lent. Fasting and abstinence on Fridays and Wednesdays (as prescribed in the first century work *Didache*) were a common apostolic practise among Nazranis. 50 Days Fast of Lent, 25 Days Fast of Advent, 50 Days Fast of the Apostles, 15 Days Fast, Fast of 12 Fridays after Christmas, 3 Days Fast of Ninevites, 8 Days Fast, Fast of the Virgins, Fast of Elijah, Fast of Transfiguration and other vigil fasts are an indication towards the intense ascetic orientation of Nazranis. Once we avoid overlapping days, the total fasting days come 225 per year! Fasting meant total abstinence from meat, fish, egg, milk and milk products, alcohol, sexual life, smoking, chewing betel, etc.²⁵

Pilgrimages

Nazranis were fond of making pilgrimages to places associated with Apostle Thomas' mission work in South India. Mylapur being the spot of his martyrdom and tomb was one of the most prominent locations. St Thomas Christians from the Malabar Coast used to walk all the way to pray there. Usually it took twenty five days for pilgrimage to Mylapur. They went for this only after at least 21 days of spiritual preparations, fasting, abstinence, etc. All the seven Churches started by Thomas were also favourite places for pilgrimage. On Dukrana (July 3rd), many used to visit Paravur Church for participating in the *Chatham* of Apostle Thomas. It seems that Paravur inherited this legacy after 1341. In the past all the churches and even families used to conduct the *Chatham* of Thomas for those unable to go to Paravur.

²⁵ Cf. J. Aerthayil, *The Spiritual Heritage of the St Thomas Christians* (Bangalore 1982, repr.2001).

Another regular pilgrimage to Paravur was on November 21st, the day on which Thomas landed at Maliamkara. Malayatur was another important pilgrim centre. Most of the ancient Churches were dedicated to St Mary and St Thomas. But Kuravilangad remained the most famous place because of the first Marian apparitions in history. Even today all the above mentioned pilgrim centres are very popular among Nazranis and members of other religions.

Rakuli perunnal

In the middle of the night of Denha (Epiphany) all St Thomas Christians used to take a public bath in nearby river or pond before entering the Church. This ritual bath is a reminder of the Baptism of Jesus in Jordan. On the same day at homes they celebrated “*pindikuthiperunnal*”. Oil lamps were arranged on the stem of plantain or banana trees and Nazranis went around it shouting repeatedly, EL PAYYA (meaning God is Light). In some places both these celebrations exist even today.

Pesaha Appam

St Thomas Christians celebrate the Pesaha in a Christianized manner. On Maundy Thursday evening they “break the bread” and “drink milk”. This unleavened bread is called “*kurishappam*”. It is to be broken and distributed by the senior most male member of the family. Only Christians will be given a piece of this bread. So too they share a special thick drink made from coconut-milk. This bread and milk they make only for Pesaha. If a death has occurred in the family it will not make “*kurishappam*” that year. But relatives or neighbour bake two loaves of bread, one for itself and the extra one for this family.

Naming

Most of the St Thomas Christian names were borrowed from Old Testament and New Testament. Names of early saints from the patristic period were also popular. The eldest boy is named after paternal grandfather; the eldest girl receives the name of paternal grandmother; the second boy and girl get the names of maternal grandfather and maternal grandmother respectively. Thus four names were always inherited in the family with great pride and joy. One could choose the name of the fifth child, though the choice was often that of an uncle, aunt, parent, etc. Thus we can say that most of the names among St Thomas Christians are inherited from generation to generation. Even in modern times they rarely break this naming tradition. Often pet names are developed from baptismal names, but need not necessarily. All St Thomas Christians have their own family names which are always meaningful; this could be a historical, professional, geographical term which describes something about that family. These family names could be changed by emigration or some other reason. Nowadays these family or house names are termed as surnames because of European influence.

Burial

All Nazranis were dressed white. This is only a symbol of the white garment of baptism. Even at funeral the dead is wrapped in white clothes. The crown of baptism, crown of marriage and crown of life (at funeral) are other meaningful symbols of religious identity. Nazranis like all other oriental Christians used to pray facing the east. It was a reminder of Paradise, Christ’s second coming and the morning of resurrection. At death bed a dying person’s head is to face east and the bed is arranged accordingly. Laity is buried with their head westwards so that their face ever ready to look at resurrection. But the clergy is buried just the opposite way as they are to come with Christ to welcome or judge their flock.

Nazranis dwelling far away from the Church used to bury their dead near their house. They used to erect a burial stone with oil lamps. Every evening they used to pour oil and light these lamps. Occasionally priests used to visit and pray at these private family tombs. This was known as '*kuzhimaada sewa*' (service of the tomb). Those who lived closer to the Church buried their dead in the south, west and north sides of its courtyard, but never at the east side. Cemetery burial is a Portuguese introduction. Many private family tombs marked by tomb stones and lamps could easily be seen even in the twentieth century near Kuravilangad area. Recent cultivation of rubber plantations have destroyed practically most of them. Neither the political nor ecclesiastical authorities took any care in preserving these religious and historical monuments of St Thomas Christians. Most of them were pre-Portuguese.

No food is prepared or eaten in the house before the funeral. But children are fed by neighbours. A simple vegetarian meal called '*pattinikanji*' is served after the funeral. All the close relatives take an ascetical vow for abstinence. They take only vegetarian meals until the death anniversary. This is very notable in the case of one or more adult sons (usually unmarried) of the deceased. He begins to grow beard for an year. He will not marry until the death anniversary. Eleven days after death there were special prayers at the tomb and a vegetarian meal at home. These were repeated at various intervals until death anniversary. Year after year the death anniversary was celebrated with special prayers, in the Church, at the tomb and home, culminated by '*aanduchatham*', a sumptuous meal. This meal starts with an antique custom. First of all two plantains are served to every participant. All eat them as the very first item. This symbolizes the fall of our first parents, Adam and Eve. They fell pray to death by plucking and eating the forbidden fruit. As the second item everyone is given three '*neyyappams*' or three '*unniyappams*' each. All eat these small delicious, sweet cake-like pieces of bread, symbolizing Eucharist, baptism, Christ and Trinity – life and resurrection. In this connection the Nazranis used to say: "That which came through eating of the fruit is gone by eating of the bread." (*Pazhathale wannathu appathale poyi*). After observing this unique and ancient custom St Thomas Christians proceed to the death anniversary meal. It is the privilege of married daughters of the family to bring '*neyyappams*' or '*unniyappams*' for this occasion.

Growth and Education

Even before official baptism the new born is considered to be a member of the community by the very birth from Nazrani parents. Forty days after the birth of a boy (but eighty days for a girl) the mother will not go the Church. Afterwards she goes to the Church with her child. Baptism was sometimes postponed for the sake of convenience. Soon after birth the name of Jesus Christ is whispered into the ear of the child. It is interesting to note that the name of Jesus Christ is whispered into the ear of any dying member of the Nazrani community. "*Isho Msihayku sthuthi ayirikkatte*" (Praise be to Jesus Christ) is the phrase with which the members greeted their parents, clergy, teachers, respectable elders, etc. With this greeting they used to kiss the hand as a sign of welcome and respect. Everyday after family prayers children used to practise this ritual before parents and elder members present there. The greeting was accepted by the recipients with a reply "*Eppozhum stuthi ayirikkatte*" (Praise be for ever).

The newborn baby is fed with a few drops of honey mixed with milk, gold powder and a herb *vayampu*. In the 11th month after birth the parents bring the child to '*chorutt*' or first feeding with sweet rice. The priest feeds the child with a little sweet rice three times. Some years later the child undergoes "*Ezhuthinu iruthu*" (sitting for writing/learning). The

child is seated in the lap of a teacher who, reciting some prayers, makes the child to write the letters of the alphabet. There begins a lifelong relationship between the child as disciple and the teacher as guide. On all important occasions the disciple is visited and blessed by the teacher. The disciple gives presents to his teacher on every such occasion. On the day before marriage this was very common sight in the past. The students used to treat their teachers like their parents with great respect.

Marriage

Marriages were well planned and arranged between two families according to their social, economic, cultural, educational, political status. Individuals were less important than the family and community. Betrothal was in the family; but the crowning took place in the Church. The elaborate rituals and functions in the houses of both bride and bridegroom are worth exploring and this we have to skip here. In one word they imply the socio-cultural status of St Thomas Christians in the past. Many native customs were adopted after Christianizing them. “*Thalickettu*” is a typical example. A golden leaf (in shape of ‘*aalila*’) containing a cross made of twenty one gold globes is the ‘*thali*’ of Nazrani bride. Three or seven threads are taken from ‘*manthrakodi*’ (bridal vestment) in order to form one thread to tie the ‘*thali*’ around the neck of the bride. As long as the married woman is alive she will not part with the ‘*thali*’. When she dies it is deposited in the coffer of the Church; often the portion with twenty one crosses is broken for this offering in the Church. The thread and the ‘*kozha*’ (hole or handle) are buried with her. This symbolizes the sacredness and indissolubility of Nazrani marriage. Divorce and adultery were unheard of among traditional St Thomas Christians. So too the evils like murder, alcoholism, theft, etc. were frowned upon.

CHRONICLE: EARLY PERIOD

AD 50 November St Thomas the Apostle lands at Maliamkara near Kodungalloor the Chera royal capital. He converts a few and after a week goes to Chola Kingdom and China.

AD 51 November St Thomas arrives again at Maliamkara.

AD 52 Conversions and establishment of Church (= a full fledged ecclesial unit with liturgical leaders) at the Chera royal city of Maliamkara. He starts such Churches or communities at Kollam, Thrikpaleswaram, Chayal, Niranam, Kokamangalam, Kottakayal, Palur. Thrikpaleswaram was shifted to Niranam because of adversities.

AD 59 St Thomas goes to Mylapur and Chola Kingdom, conversions and establishment of Church.

AD 62 St Thomas returns to Malankara coast via Malayatur where he establishes ‘the half Church’ (a small Christian community dependant on the Church of Maliamkara).

AD 69 St Thomas goes to Pandi and other kingdoms

AD 72 July 3 St Thomas martyred at Mylapur.

AD 50-100: Thomas stories and legends develop in South India. The most famous develop orally in the so called Seven and half Churches. Christian persecutions result in

emigrations to Angamaly, Pallipuram, Kaduthuruthy and Kuravilangad. Marian apparitions at Kuravilangad.

AD 100-180 South Indian Thomas stories reach Persia, Mesopotamia and especially Edessa.

AD 190 Pantaenus visits South India at the invitation of Christians there.

200-250 Relics of Thomas arrives in Edessa from Mylapur. A revised version of the Acts of Judas Thomas written in Syriac.

295 Mar David of Basra leaves for South India.

325 Council of Nicaea

363-365 Mar Aprem describes the powerful relics of Thomas in Edessa brought from India by a Christian merchant.

381 Council of Constantinople

440 Daniel the Indian scholar helps the translation works at the School of Edessa.

470 Mar Ma'na of Riwardashir sends liturgical and hymn books in Persian and Syriac to India.

500-1000 Crosses of Mylapur, Kodungallur (two crosses now at Kottayam Valiyapally), Kaduthuruthy (two crosses), Alangad, Muttuchira, Kothanallur and Kadamattam, and Goa. Two similar crosses are from Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka) and Singanfou (China). To call them 'Persian Crosses' would be a misnomer. Excavations will result in the discovery of similar crosses from Malabar.

522 Cosmas Indicopleustes visits the Indian and East Syrian Christians here.

660 East Syrian Patriarch Isho Yahb III rebukes Mar Simeon of Riwardashir for neglect of sending bishops to India.

760 Church of India reconstituted under the Metropolitan and Gate of All India.

813 Arrival of Persian bishops Mar Sapor and Mar Proth at Kollam.

1002 Oldest Syriac inscription so far discovered, at the step of the altar at the old Cathedral of Palai.

1291 John Monte Corvino visits India.

1295 Marco Polo visits Malabar and Mylapur.

1301 Fourteen year old Deacon Scaria son of Yawsep son of Scaria writes Vat Syr 22 at the Church of Mar Kuriakose at Kodungallur. It is an East Syriac lectionary on Pauline letters. Metropolitan Mar Yakob sits on "The Throne St Thomas" and Yahb Allaha III is the Patriarch. This is the oldest surviving Syriac manuscript of Indian origin.

1321 Four Franciscans martyred at Thane near Mumbai.

1321 Dominican Jordanus Catalani visits India.

1329 Pope John XXII sends bishop Jordanus Catalani to Kollam.

1341 Ancient city of Kodungallur (Muchiri) disappears in natural calamity.

1350 Papal Nuncio John Maringoly visits Kollam.

1425 Nicolo Conti visits the East Syriac Christians at Mylapur.

1496 East Syrian bishops Mar Thoma and Mar Yohannan arrive from Mesopotamia.

PERIOD OF MILD LATINIZATION

1498 Vasco de Gama lands at Kozhikod (Calicut).

1502 Joseph the Indian priest visits Portugal and Rome.

1503 Kochi under Portuguese rule.

1504 East Syrian bishops Mar Thoma, Mar Yahb Alaha, Mar Denha and Mar Yakob arrive in Malabar.

1504 Kodungallur captured by the Portuguese. Syrian Christians begin to leave Kodungallur.

1510 Portuguese Franciscans arrive in India.

1540 Franciscans start a seminary at Kodungallur.

1541 Jesuits start St Paul's seminary at Goa.

1542 Francis Xavier and Jesuits in Malabar.

1547 St Thomas Cross discovered at Mylapur.

1552 Hierarchy in Goa.

1558 Chaldean bishops Mar Abraham and Mar Joseph in Malabar.

1565 Angamaly Archdiocese.

1577 Vypinkotta Seminary.

1597 Death of Mar Abraham the last Chaldean Metropolitan of India.

PERIOD OF WILD LATINIZATION

1599 Udayamperur (Diamper) Synod. Latin rule forced upon St Thomas Christians. Forceful latinizations go on.

1601 All India jurisdiction of St Thomas Christians restricted to Malabar. Jesuit Francis Roz appointed for St Thomas Christians.

1609 Kodungallur becomes diocese instead of Angamaly.

1624 Dominican Seminary at Kaduthuruthy.

PERIOD OF DIVISIONS

1653 January 3 Koonan Cross Oath at Mattancherry. A few months later 12 priests place their hands on Mar Thoma Arkadiacon and declare him Metropolitan.

1661 Mar Sebastiani arrives as Vicar Apostolic. Already the St Thomas Christians are divided into two factions (Puthenkur and Pazhayakur). Pazhayakur became Syro-Malabar Church and Chaldean Syrian Church of Trichur. Puthenkur developed into Independent Syrian Church of Thozhiyur (1772), Yakobaya Church (1665-1876), Mar Thoma Syrian Church (1876), Malankara Orthodox Church (1912) and Malankara Catholic Church (1930/32).

1663 The Dutch overthrow the Portuguese in Kochi.

1663 Palliveetil Mar Chandy consecrated as the first native Vicar Apostolic since Sebastiani had to quit India.

1665 Mar Grigorios of Jerusalem arrives. In history he is the first ever West Syrian or Antiochean bishop to come to India. He is the starting point of Antiochean and Yakobaya connection in India.

1687 Death of Palliveetil Mar Chandy.

1701 Chaldean bishop Mar Simeon reaches Malabar and consecrates Angelo Francis.

1705 Mar Gabriel arrives.

1735 Death and burial of Mar Gabriel at Kottayam Cheriya pally.

1752 Devasahayam Pillai martyred.

1778 Kariyattil Yawsep Malpan and Paremmakkal Thoma Kathanar travel to Lisbon and Rome to reunite the St Thomas Christians into one fold.

1783 Yawsep Kariyattil from Alangad consecrated Metropolitan of Kodungallur.

1786 Mar Kariyattil "martyred" at Goa.

1786 Paremmakkal becomes the Administrator of Kodungallur.

1786 Angamaly Padiyola.

1799 Demise of Administrator Mar Thomas Paremmakkal at Ramapuram.

1814 Demise of Thachil Mathu Tharakan

1857 Kudakkachira Anthony Kathanar died at Baghdad.

1861 Chaldean bishop Mar Thoma Rokos arrived. In 1862 he is forced to return.

1862 Anthony Thondanat approached the Chaldean Patriarch to be consecrated but got rejected. Then he was consecrated as Mar Abdisho at Kurdistan by Patriarch Mar Ruwel Shimon.

1866 Puthenpally Seminary.

1874 'Seven Dolours' expelled from TOCD.

1874-82 Chaldean bishop Mar Eliah Mellus in Trichur. He was forced to return in 1882. But Mar Abdisho took charge of the community under Mellus.

1876 Apostolic Visitor Leo Meureen arrives.

1885 Apostolic Delegate Anthony Aliyardi arrives.

1886 Latin hierarchy of Varapuzha.

SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH

1887 Vicariates of Kottayam and Trichur. Two Latin and non-Indian bishops were entrusted with the so-called Syro-Malabar Church.

1896 Vicariates of Ernakulam, Kottayam (Changanachery) and Trichur with native bishops..

1900 Nov 16 Mar Abdisho died in Trichur.

1904 June 20 Demise of Nidhirikal Mani Kathanar

1908 Feb 27 East Syrian Mar Abimalek Timotheos reached Trichur and re-introduced East Syriac traditions though the community was called CHALDEAN SYRIANS.

1911 Vicariate of Kottayam for the Southists.

1923 Syro-Malabar hierarchy.

1930 Reunion of Mar Ivanios and followers result in the creation of SYRO-MALANKARA CHURCH in 1932.

1932 Puthenpally Seminary shifted to Mangalapuzha.

1946 Death of St Alphonsa at Bharananganam.

1950 Dioceses of Changanacherry and Palai.

1953 Cardinal Tisserant's visit.

1953 Thalasserry diocese.

1954-1959 CMI priests work in Ambikapur mission, but after a few years ousted because of their being Syro-Malabar.

1955 Syro-Malabar jurisdiction extended beyond Pampa and Bharathapuzha because of Tisserant and Fr.Placid.

1956 Changanacherry Archdiocese.

1957 Kothamangalam diocese.

1961 Relics of Mar Kariyattil brought from Goa to Alangad.

1962 Chanda mission to CMI priests.

1962 Vadavathur Seminary.

1962 Restoration of Syro-Malabar Qurbana.

1968 Exarchates of Chanda, Ujjain, Satna and Sagar.

1972 Exarchates of Bijnor and Jagdalpur.

1973 Diocese of Mananthavady.

1974 Diocese of Palakkad.

1977 Diocese of Kanjirappally.

1978 Diocese of Iringalakuda.

1983 Diocese of Rajkot.

1984 Diocese of Gorakpur.

1986 Renewed Syro-Malabar Qurbana.

1986 Diocese of Thamarasserry.

1988 Diocese of Kalyan.

1993 Syro-Malabar Church becomes Major Archiepiscopal. Mar Anthony Padiyara becomes the Major Archbishop and Mar Abraham Kattumana, the Pontifical Delegate.

1995 Trichur and Thalasserry Archdioceses.

1996 Diocese of Thakkala.

1997 Mar Varkey Vithayathil becomes Apostolic Administrator, later the Major Archbishop.

1999 Diocese of Adilabad.

1999 Diocese of Belthangadi.

2001 Syro-Malabar Diocese of Chicago.

2003 Diocese of Idukki.

2007 Diocese of Bhadravathy.

2008 Canonization of St Alphonsa.

2010 Diocese of Mandya.

2010 Diocese of Ramanathapuram.

2011 Mar George Alencherry elected as the Major Archbishop.

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