

MALANKARA ORTHODOX CHURCH

THE CATHOLICATE OF THE EAST

*A Brief Account*



Published in 1986

by

THE CHURCH PUBLICATION DEPARTMENT

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# Malankara Orthodox Church

## THE CATHOLICATE OF THE EAST

The history of Christianity in India goes back to very ancient times even to as far back as 52 A. D. Emissaries of the Western Church began to appear in India from the late 13th century, The Portuguese Missionaries arrived in the 16th century. They have left us their own accounts of the Christian Church in India.

The Church was however from its inception, one Church, united, tolerant, and living in peace with the people of other religions. Today this one church of India is divided, due to the impact of western missions. The "St. Thomas Christians" or the "Syrian Christians" exist at present in about fifteen different churches and denominations. Among them one of the major bodies is the Orthodox Syrian Church under the Catholicate of the East with its Head quarters at Devalokam, Kottayam.

### **The beginning of the Church**

That the Apostle Thomas, one of the twelve, is the founder of the St. Thomas Christians is a well established tradition. The evidence for it is fairly high. Christian writers and representatives of churches at least from the 4th century refer the evangelistic labours of the Apostle Thomas to India, and the Indian Christians ascribe the origin of their church to this event in the first century.

It is reasonable to believe that the Apostle came to India, preached the gospel, established the Church, and died here as a martyr. There is no better hypothesis to explain the beginning of this Indian Church than the one attested by both universal and local tradition that the Apostle Thomas was its founder. Until other acceptable evidence comes to light either about the beginning of the Church in India or about the life and work of the Apostle, the founding of the Indian Church is best attributed to him.

### **Highlights in a Chequered History**

The Church was probably quite extensive in India — in the north-west (including present Kashmir, Sind, Baluchistan and Afghanistan) as well as around the southern coast from Kalyan near Bombay on the west to Madras on the east coast, including probably Sri Lanka. Gondophores with whom the tradition referred to in the Acts of Judas Thomas associates the ministry of the Apostle Thomas, was an Indo-Parthian King in the north-west of India, and Vasudeva who is reported to have condemned the Apostle to death was a King of the Kushan dynasty near Madras.

## **1 West Asian Migrations**

South India had trade connections with the mediteranean and the West Asian World in ancient times. This enabled the Church in those areas, particularly Persia, to have a knowledge of the existence of a Christian community in India. Many Christians when they were persecuted in the Persian empire fled to the south coast of India and found there a ready and warm welcome.

The most memorable of such immigrations was that of a colony of Persian Christians who fled to India under Thomas of Cana around 345 A. D. during the persecution of Sapor II. Tradition says that the colony consisted of 72 families, with a bishop and a number of presbyters, about 400 members in all. These families were received gladly by the Christian community, and the Hindu King of the area granted them special privileges inscribed on copper plates. The Southist community of Kerala claims descent from these settlers.

## **2 How the Church was Governed**

We have no documentary evidence referring to the way the Indian Church was governed in the early centuries. Tradition has it that the Apostle Thomas established Churches in Kerala and appointed priests for them. These priests did obviously correspond to bishops of Churches in other parts of the world.

Like the Churches of Ethiopia and Nubia in Africa and of Armenia and Georgia in Asia, the Indian Church maintained its autonomous administration and life under a local leader, Jathiku Karthairan, who came to be called later the archdeacon. The Church of Persia in particular had a tradition which acknowledged such autonomy for Churches in its communion abroad. When the Portuguese established themselves in India in the 16th century, they found the Church in Kerala as an administratively independent community.

We have now a complete list of all the bishoprics in the West Syrian Church till the 12th century, but never once does the name of any Church in India appear in these lists. The fact therefore is clear that the West Syrian Church had no connection with the Indian Church till then.

## **3. The Persian Connection**

The case of the East Syrian Church was different. The Indian Church came in contact with it possibly from the 4th century, from the time of Thomas of Cana. This connection continued, though a connected account of the same has not come down to us. However, we have evidence that in the 6th century there were bishops in the Indian Church who had been consecrated in Persia. Cosmos who visited South India about the year 520 mentions in his Universal Christian Topography that he saw a Church of Malabar with a bishop residing at Kalyan who had been consecrated in Persia. In the 7th century Patriarch Ishoyab III of the Persian Church scolded Metropolitan

Simon of Riwardashir in Fars because he failed to assist the Indian Church with the priestly ministry which it needed. In the same century the Patriarch enjoined on the metropolitan of the Indian Church to send every six years only a letter of allegiance to him, in recognition of the Church's autonomy. In the 9th century Patriarch Timothy of the Church of Persia relieved the metropolitan of Riwardashir from holding connection with the Indian Church and took over the responsibility himself. In the same century two Persian bishops, Prodh and Sabor, came to Kerala. They received special royal grants from the King at Quilon recorded on copper plates. The "Persian Crosses" now extant in Kerala as well as in Madras belong to this period.

In the 5th century the Church of Persia came to its own. Its Catholicos with his seat at Seleucia-Ctesiphon began to be called also Patriarch, and in 486 the Church officially accepted a resolution in its Synod to recognise Nestorius as a saint and Church father. This decision was not however accepted by a minority of Persian Christians, who acknowledged a Catholicos at Tagrit in northern Mesopotamia as their spiritual head in 629 A. D. From that time on there were two lines of ecclesiastical heads in Persia, one claiming direct continuity with the Catholicos-Patriarch of Seleucia, and the other in communion with the Antiochene Syrian Patriarch also claiming continuity with the Seleucian Catholicate prior to its acceptance of Nestorius.

The latter Catholicos, or Maphrian, does not seem even to have sought to establish contacts with the Indian Church or to send out missionaries to countries outside Persia during those centuries. But the dignitaries of the other line kept to its connection with the Indian Church and carried on evangelistic work in a number of eastern countries including China.

We have evidence that in the 8th century the Indian Church had its primate known as "The Metropolitan and the Gate of All India" with suffragan bishops, a title adopted presumably under Islamic influence. The Vatican Syriac Codex 22, written in Cranganore in 1301, gives the title as "The Metropolitan of the Throne of St. Thomas, and of the whole Church of the Christians of India".

In 1490 a three-man delegation from the Indian Church set out on a journey to the "Nestorian" Patriarch in order to bring bishops to their country. One of them died on the way and the other two presented their request to the Patriarch. They brought to India two bishops-Mar Thoma and Mar John. Mar Thoma returned to the Patriarch, who now sent four other bishops. It was one of them, Mar Jacob, who had to deal with the Portuguese till his death in 1552.

## **The Portuguese Period**

Following the arrival of Vasco de Gama, a Portuguese General, in Calicut in 1498, the Portuguese came to South India and established themselves as a political power in the country. Without going in any detail into the Portuguese administration, we may note that the missionaries who came with the secular men were eager to bring the

Indian Church into communion with Rome. They worked on it almost all through the 16th century and succeeded in their plan in 1599 by means of Synod of Diamper. This assembly of representatives from Churches was forced to give up the Indian Church's connection with the Patriarch of the Persian Church in favour of the Pope of Rome.

Following the Synod, the Indian Church came to be governed by three archbishops belonging to the Society of Jesus. But the people on the whole led by the archdeacon were not happy about this state of affairs. This disaffection led to a general revolt in 1653 known commonly as the Coonan Cross Revolt in which practically the entire Christian community was involved. Portuguese efforts, to put it down by force did not succeed. Now Rome entered directly through missionaries of the Propaganda Fidei and in about five years a large body of those rebelled went back to Roman allegiance.

A body of people under the leadership of the Archdeacon held out. They stood for the administrative autonomy of the Indian Church. Since they had no bishop to guide them, this body had to face serious difficulties. In any case they were determined to keep to the independence of the Indian Church.

The Portuguese were in fact instrumental in causing a division in the one, united Church in India. Although they succeeded in getting the allegiance of a party in the Church to the Roman Catholic communion, an equally important party (though numerically smaller) did not follow their way.

### **The Antiochene Connection**

The party, that sought to preserve the Church's freedom appealed to several eastern Christian Centres for help in restoring its episcopal succession. The Antiochene Syrian Patriarch responded and sent to India a bishop, Metropolitan Mar Gregorius of Jerusalem. He came in 1665. The archdeacon who had been declared in the mean time to be Metropolitan Mar Thoma by the laying on of hands by twelve presbyters was now confirmed by him in his episcopal rank, and both of them worked together to organize the Church on firm footing.

Mar Thoma I was followed in succession by a series of prelates with the same name till 1816, when the last of them namely Mar Thoma IX came on the scene but was soon replaced by Mar Dionysius II. During this period of more than a century and a half, the Malankara Church continued in a helpless situation. It had need of establishing systematic education for its clergy, teaching the people in the faith, instructing the clergy in properly celebrating the liturgical services, and above all assistance in the maintenance of its episcopal succession intact. The Malankara Church requested the Antiochene Syrian Patriarch for help and asked for learned bishops and teachers. However, in approaching the Patriarch, the Malankara Church had no idea of formally submitting to his jurisdiction, but only of keeping to a friendly relation. The Patriarch realized the delicacy of the situation and did not apparently press for the acknowledgement of his authority by the Malankara Church.



However, things changed from about the middle of the 18th century. In response to appeals from the Malankara Church, he sent a body of clergymen including three men in the episcopal rank, of whom one was a Catholicos. Now the Patriarch demanded that the Church submitted to his jurisdiction and Mar Thoma V who led the Church at that time received a confirmation of his episcopal title from the Syrian bishops as the Patriarch's nominee. But Mar Thoma V refused to comply and the hitch continued for about two decades. In the end in 1770 Mar Thoma VI who had succeeded Mar Thoma V in 1765 agreed to a compromise. He received the confirmation as Metropolitan and adopted the name Mar Dionysius. This is the Mar Dionysius the great of our Church who lived and guided the Church till his death in 1808.

### **Co-operation with the C. M. S.**

By 1795 the British established themselves in South India and Kerala came under their political sway. From 1800 a British Resident was appointed to keep the link between the British Crown and Kerala. The first two residents, Col. Colin Macaulay and Col. John Munro were Anglican Christians who took an interest in the affairs of the Malankara Syrian Church. During the time of the former, the Church deposited with the British East India Company a sum of Rs. 10,500 as a permanent investment fetching 8% annual interest, and two leading men of the Anglican Communion, Dr. Claudius Buchanan and Dr. Richard Hall Keror visited the Church. In the days of Col. Munro, Ittoop Cathanar of Pulicot, a senior priest of the Church expressed his interest in founding a seminary for the teaching of the Church's clergy. The resident supported him and the Seminary was founded in 1815. Ittoop Cathanar was made a bishop, (Metropolitan Mar Dionysius II). From 1816 the experiment of co-operation between the Syrian Church and the C.M.S. of the Anglican Church was carried on, but it was found to be unsuccessful and was called off in 1836.

This incident led to the division of the Community into three bodies. One of them, a reformed group, tried to bring about serious reforms in the liturgy and practices of the Church as a whole, but failed. After about half a century of conflict within the Church, this body had to withdraw and organize itself as the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. A smaller body of the Syrian Christians opted to join with the missionaries and be absorbed in the Anglican Church. The majority of the community continued in the Church without accepting the reforms.

### **Part of the Antiochene Syrian Church**

The conflict between the body which adopted the reform and that which opposed it was a serious development in the Church during the 19th century. This led the latter to appeal for help from the Antiochene Syrian Patriarch. In 1875 Patriarch Peter III came to Kerala and held a Synod of representatives of Churches at Mulanthuruthy in 1876. This Synod adopted a number of resolutions, including an admission that the Church would continue in the communion of the Patriarch and the Syrian Church of Antioch. However, the Patriarch tried to see in these decisions more than the Indian Church really wanted to acknowledge.

Following the Synod of Mulanthuruthy in 1876, a litigation in court between the party in favour of the reforms and the party against it continued. It came to an end in 1889 with the judgement announced in favour of the latter by the then highest court of Kerala, the Royal Court of Appeal. The majority in a panel of three judges gave their verdict, admitting that from the middle of the 18th century an over-all spiritual supervision used to be exercised by the Patriarch over the Malankara Church and that he had a right to claim it.

Patriarch Peter III was not satisfied with this judgement. He was keen to establish that he had full authority over the Malankara Church both in its spiritual and in its temporal matters, and not merely an over-all spiritual supervision. In fact, he protested, though nobody responsible in the matter took note of it. His second successor, Patriarch Mar Abdullah II, was determined to follow up the matter. With this intention he came to Kerala in 1909 and pressed the issue. But that led to a sad division in the Church from 1911, one party siding with the Patriarch and the other lining up with Metropolitan Mar Dionysius VI of Vattasseril who stood against him.

## **The Catholicate**

In this conflict the Metropolitan was fortunate enough to obtain the support of Patriarch Mar Abdul Messiah the immediate successor to Patriarch Peter III. Patriarch Peter III was succeeded in 1895 by Mar Abdul Messiah. By a state interference he had lost his position in Turkey and came to be replaced by Mar Abdullah. While Metropolitan Mar Dionysius VI clashed with Mar Abdullah, the Canonical Patriarch Abdul Messiah offered to come to the assistance of the former. Thus in 1912 he came to Kerala and associated with Mar Dionysius VI and the bishops and the Church with him, to establish the Catholicate of the East in Malankara.

Catholicos is an ecclesiastical dignitary recognised in the Antiochene Syrian Church itself. He is equal in rank with the Patriarch, though the latter has his primus inter pares (first among equals). The significance of the Catholicate of the East now at Kottayam is that:

- 1 It is the same dignitary acknowledged in the Antiochene Syrian Church.
- 2 It was established in Malankara in co-operation with the Canonical Patriarch Abdul Messiah, who was senior to Mar Abdullah. Thereby the Patriarch himself has withdrawn his right of spiritual oversight in the Indian Church which the Royal Court of Appeal had acknowledged for him in 1889.
- 3 The Indian Church has an apostolic foundation. Though historical disabilities have made it difficult for this Church to keep to its continuity in an unbroken way, God has guided it all through the centuries. Now with the establishment of the Catholicate, the Church has come to its own. The

Present Catholicos is H. H. Moran Mar Baselius Marthoma Mathews II

In grateful hearts we offer praise and thanks to God Almighty Who has guided this Church all through the centuries to fulfil His own divine purpose. May His name be glorified, for ever and ever.

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