

THE ROLE OF THE LAITY IN THE HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE OF THE MALANKARA ORTHODOX SYRIAN CHURCH: A UNIQUE FEATURE OF THE ASIAN CHRISTIAN HERITAGE

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Abstract

This article deals with the role of the laity in the hierarchical structure and the whole functioning of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. The origin and development of the Church of St Thomas Christians in the rich religious and cultural milieu of India is depicted as an introduction to the central theme of the evolution of the present full-fledged system of lay participation in the key areas of ecclesial life. No Christian Church other than the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church has such a history of growth in the midst of world religions as well as in communion and confrontation with other Christian Churches. Her ecclesial heritage is derived from the *Mar Thoma Margam*. The revolt against the bishops of the Pakalomattam lineage, the demands for the re-introduction of the rights of the laity, the collective deliberation as well as the consequent decisions in furtherance of the democratic ideals and in pursuance of the promotion of the values of the *Mar Thoma Margam* unfold important episodes of Indian Church history. The extent of the lay participation in the ecclesial life of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church is astonishing. The lay people play a decisive

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role not only in the election of the Catholicos and the Metropolitans, but also in the whole administration of the Church.

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The ecclesial heritage of the Apostolic Church of the St Thomas Christians which is rooted in the rich spiritual soil of India enriched by various indigenous religions and ancient cultures assumes great ecclesial significance in the present world due to its solid biblical foundation and patristic nourishment on the one hand and the unprecedented extent of the current existential crisis of the ancient Churches in the West as well as in the Middle East on the other hand. The vicissitudes of ecclesial loyalty thrust upon the Church of St Thomas Christians in the course of her chequered history marked by the influence of various churches from abroad necessitated splits on her ecclesial fabric one after another. The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church was born in the aftermath of the disputed Synod of Diamper (1599). The birth pangs of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church to grow to the status of an autocephalous Church through the erection of the Catholicate (1912) constitute a unique episode in the history of the universal church. This paper focuses on how the role of the laity in the hierarchical structure of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church enriched the Asian Christian heritage.

1. Origin and Development of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church traces its origin back to St Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, who founded seven and a half Christian communities in South India in the second half of the first century. David Daniel makes the following comment on the historicity of the apostolate of St Thomas in India: "Historical as well as apocryphal works of later historians and also traditional belief fill this vacuum of contemporary evidences. The earliest and original references of the missionary travel of St Thomas to India are found in the works of the writers of the early Church such as Origen (185-254), Hippolytus (160-235), Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesaria (260-340) and in the Acts of Thomas (200) and the Book of Doctrines of Apostles composed about 250 AD."¹ The most significant witness of the Indian apostolate of St Thomas is the ancient Malabar

¹David Daniel, *The Orthodox Church of India*, New Delhi, 1972, 2.

tradition which is not contradicted by any other rival tradition. According to the Malabar tradition, St Thomas, the Apostle, landed in the port of Muziris near Kodungallur (Cranganur) on the Malabar coast of Kerala in 52 AD.² Also Bar Hebraeus, the Catholicos (1266-86) of the Persian Church, writes about the missionary activity of St Thomas, the Apostle, in India.³ The tradition of the seven and a half communities of St Thomas Christians points to the apostolate of St Thomas. Maliankara, Palayur, Kottakkavu, Korkkumangalam, Niranam, Chayal (near Nilackal) and Kurakkenikollam are the seven communities established by the Apostle. He converted the Jews first and then the high-caste Hindus.⁴ David Daniel hails St Thomas the founder of Christianity in India and the Apostle of the East and establishes a solid and firm foundation for the Indian apostolate of St Thomas on the facts that there is no rival tradition for the origin of Christianity in Kerala other than that attributed to St Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Christ and no other place in the world other than Mylapore in Madras claims to have the tomb of St Thomas and historians of repute outside India testify to the Indian Apostolate of St Thomas, from early centuries.⁵ Eminent Orthodox scholars like Paulose Mar Gregorios Metropolitan⁶ and T.I. Varghese staunchly support and corroborate the Indian apostolate and martyrdom of St Thomas. T.I. Varghese states that the consciousness of the Thomas Christians, which is well-founded on their tradition is that the Christian message was brought to them by St Thomas, one of the apostles of Jesus.⁷

J. Kurian explains the nature and the structure of the Church of St Thomas Christians with reference to the other Christian Churches:

The Church that had its historical beginning at the Pentecost grew up in and through Eucharistic communities around Jerusalem. These communities, guided by the apostles met at the temple and houses, had certain common features as given in Acts 2:43-47 and 4:32-37. Confrontation with Judaisers resulted in evolving a developed structure

²Daniel, *The Orthodox Church of India*, 2-3.

³Daniel, *The Orthodox Church of India*, 4.

⁴C.V. Cherian, *Orthodox Christianity in India, A History of the Malankara Orthodox Church AD 52-2002*, Kottayam: Academic Publishers, 2003, 1.

⁵Daniel, *The Orthodox Church of India*, 32.

⁶Paulos Mar Gregorios, *The Indian Orthodox Church An Overview*, Delhi and Kottayam: Sophia Publications, 1982, 5.

⁷T.I. Varghese, "Life and Ministry of Church of the Thomas Christians during the Pre-Portuguese Period," in Xavier Koodapuzha/John Panicker, ed., *Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, Papers and Joint Statements 1989-2000*, Kottayam, 2001, 216.

of the Church with possibilities of cultural diversity (Acts 15). Autonomous communities with presbyters and bishops to lead them in apostolic faith and practice were the general phenomena of the first and second century Christian Church. It was possibly this structure that existed in the ancient Indian Church of St Thomas without much interruption till the 16th century.⁸

Metropolitan Mathews Mar Severios says that St Thomas, the Apostle, who reached Malabar in 52 AD, must have established a hierarchy and introduced a liturgy before he died in 72 AD.⁹ There was valid priesthood in the Indian Church. The Church of St Thomas Christians received the faith of the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) through the Church of the East in Persia.¹⁰ The Church of the St Thomas Christians depended on the East Syriac Church of the Persian Empire for bishops and ecclesial communion. Thus there developed a long relation between the Malankara Church and the Persian Church, both founded by St Thomas.¹¹ That the Church of the St Thomas Christians was enriched with the East Syriac liturgy and other ecclesial disciplines cannot be undermined with any trivial argument of the indigenization of the liturgy.¹² A harmonious blend of the Indian ecclesial tradition anchored in the Indian cultural heritage and the ecclesial traditions of the Church of the East came into existence and it is known as the *Mar Thoma Margam* (the Way/Law of St Thomas), the sum total of the ecclesial heritage of the St Thomas Christians. The *Mar Thoma Margam* included liturgical, ministerial, disciplinary, spiritual and ascetical elements and the Thomas Christians were deeply attached to it.¹³

⁸J. Kurian, "The Manifestation of the Unity of the Church," in X. Koodapuzha/J. Panicker, ed., *Joint International Commission for Dialogue...*, Kottayam, 2001, 170.

⁹Metropolitan Mathews Mar Severios, "Catholicatinte Prasakthi," *Georgian Mirror* 4 (2011) 6.

¹⁰Karottuveetil Semavoon Mar Deevannassios, *Kandanadu Grandhavari* (History of Malankara Church), Kunnankulam: MJD Publishing House, 2008, 27.

¹¹C.V. Cheriyan, "The Malankara Church Prior to the Arrival of the Portuguese: Its Identity and Relations with Foreign Churches," in X. Koodapuzha/J. Panicker, ed., *Joint International Commission for the Dialogue...*, Kottayam, 2001, 200; M. Kurian Thomas, "Malankara Sabhayude Persian Bandham," *Malankara Sabha*, June 27, 2005.

¹²M. Kurian Thomas, "Malankara Sabhayude Persian Bandham," *Malankara Sabha*, June, 27-28, 2005; T.I. Varghese, "Life and Ministry of Church of the Thomas Christians During the Pre-Portuguese Period," in X. Koodapuzha/J. Panicker, ed., *Joint International Commission for the Dialogue...*, Kottayam, 2001, 217; Metropolitan Jacob Mar Ireneos, "Malankara Catholicatinte Bhavi," *Georgian Mirror* 4 (2011) 6.

¹³"Joint Statements, Report on the Life and Ministry of the Indian Church of St Thomas Christians before the Synod of Diamper," in X. Koodapuzha/J. Panicker, ed., *Joint International Commission for the Dialogue...*, Kottayam, 2001, 292.

The administrative system of the Church of St Thomas Christians under the Archdeacon of All India is a strong evidence for the Persian relationship. The Archdeacon of All India had the authority of the Archdeacon in the Persian Church. There are differences between the authority of the Archdeacons of the East Syrian and West Syrian traditions.¹⁴ The “Palliyogam”, the indigenous ecclesial administrative system of the St Thomas Christians reflects the administrative system of the Hindu temples in Kerala.¹⁵ *Palliyogam* is one of the unique ecclesial features of the St Thomas Christians and shows the importance of the laity in the hierarchical structure of the Church with a specifically decisive role. The administrative system of the Church of St Thomas Christians had structures at three levels, namely, the *Palliyogam* at the local level, the office of the Archdeacon at the community level and the Metropolitan of All India and the Holy See of St Thomas at the hierarchical level.

Palliyogam was the decision-making body at the local level with a vast majority of lay people and it traces its origin to the traditional village assembly of the Dravidians known as *Manram*¹⁶ and to the assembly of temple administrators called *Ooranmakar*; *Ooranma* means administration by the people of the place.¹⁷ *Palliyogam* is one of the greatest contributions of the St Thomas Christians to the Universal Church and it had its origin even before the democratic republics came into existence. It is remarkable that *Palliyogam* has imbibed the spirit of the College of Apostles which led the early Church.

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church believes that the Church of the St Thomas Christians had the true apostolic faith in the pre-Portuguese period. From a close study of the references contained in the writings of the European visitors like Ferdinand Paz (AD 1554) and Nunes Barreto and the Portuguese missionaries like Bishop Roz SJ, it is clear that the Christians in Kerala understood the mysteries of the Christian faith, that they were firm in the mystery of the Most

¹⁴M. Kurian Thomas, “Malankara Sabhayude Persian Bandham,” *Malankara Sabha*, 2005, June, 27.

¹⁵M.O. John, “The Authority Structure of the Thomas Christians Prior to the 16th Century,” in X. Koodapuzha/J. Panicker, ed., *Joint International Commission for the Dialogue...*, Kottayam, 2001, 356-359.

¹⁶Xavier Koodapuzha, “Communion of Churches: Its Ecumenical Relevance in the Indian Context,” in Xavier Koodapuzha, ed., *Communion of Churches*, Kottayam: OIRSI, 1993, 68.

¹⁷James Thalachelloor & Mathew Madathikunnel, “Palliyogam among the St Thomas Christians,” in Andrews Mekkattukunnel, ed., *Mar Thoma Margam, The Ecclesial Heritage of the St Thomas Christians*, Kottayam: OIRSI, 2012, 891.

Holy Trinity, that of the incarnation as well as of the Most Holy Sacrament of the altar, that they professed all the articles of the Nicene Creed, the equality of the divine persons and the two natures and one person of Christ. Thus it will be seen that it was “the Catholic or Orthodox faith” that the Malankara Christians professed.¹⁸

T.I. Varghese writes on the faith of the Church of St Thomas Christians during the pre-Portuguese period as follows:

They believe that the Church so established had in possession all the essential features which were needed for its life and ministry similar to all other contemporary apostolically established churches elsewhere around the world. It had a Christian faith, a worshipping form, a code of moral conduct, a ministry, a method of gospel proclamation, etc. Although a fuller development were of late centuries, no one doubts the presence of a nuclear form of all these as they were to be found in other early Christian communities.¹⁹

One of the unique features of the ecclesiology of the St Thomas Christians in the pre-Portuguese period is the absence of divisions. His Holiness Baselius Marthoma Mathews I, Catholicos of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church on the occasion of the reception given to Pope John Paul II at Kottayam on February 8th, 1985 referred in the welcome address to the cause of the divisions in the Church of the St Thomas Christians. He stated:

There existed only an undivided single Christian Church in this land before five centuries. The children of St Thomas formed a single flock. But the children of St Thomas are pathetically divided today. Our Christian brothers who came from the West brought all the divisions, which existed there, here also. We existed once as a single Church welcoming all those who came from abroad in the name of Christ as members of the one body of Christ. We received the Portuguese too in that way with its consequences. Oh! Pity to us! Who will re-establish to us that unity? Who will heal these wounds bleeding for centuries?²⁰

The Indian Church kept its unity and remained a single undivided Church till the arrival of the Portuguese.²¹

¹⁸C.V. Cheriyan, “The Malankara Church Prior to the Arrival of the Portuguese: Its Identity and Relations with Foreign Churches,” in X. Koodapuzha/J. Panicker, ed., *Joint International Commission for the Dialogue...*, Kottayam, 2001, 201-202.

¹⁹T.I. Varghese, “Life and Ministry of Church of the Thomas Christians During the Pre-Portuguese Period,” in X. Koodapuzha/J. Panicker, ed., *Joint International Commission for the Dialogue...*, Kottayam, 2001, 216.

²⁰K.V. Mammen, *Malankara Sabhayile Catholicamar* (Biographical Church History), Kottayam: Kottackal Publishers, 1999, 456-457.

²¹Kondothra M. George, “The Christological Consensus Reached in the Vienna Consultations and Its Relevance in India,” in Alfred Stirnemann/Gerhard Wilflinger,

It is clearly stated that the separate community which came into existence with the arrival of the group of Christians under the leadership of Thomas of Cana in the 4th century did not lead to a division in the Malankara Church.²² V.C. Samuel, a leading theologian of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, criticizes the Roman Catholic Church and the Portuguese colonialists for the division in the Indian Church in the following words: "Thus the Indian Church, which till then had been united, came to be divided. One part continues in the Roman Catholic Church, and the other seeks an Eastern ecclesiastical identity undisturbed."²³

It was the Roman Catholic Church that divided the Church of St Thomas Christians in India through her colonial domination and the historic pledge of the Coonan Cross (1653) marked the protest of the St Thomas Christians against the Portuguese and the Roman Catholic colonial domination.²⁴ Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church is of the opinion that the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church supported the division of the Church of St Thomas Christians and protected the faction that was brought under his jurisdiction.²⁵

The offices of the Metropolitan of All-India and the Archdeacon of All-India merged in the same person of Mar Thoma I after the Coonan-Cross Oath. The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church had a history of independent development separated from the faction of the St Thomas Christians which came under the jurisdiction of the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church. The Synod of Parumala of 1873 is a milestone in the history of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. The decision of the Synod of Parumala to create an association for the administration of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church shows her commitment to the ancient apostolic ecclesial heritage of the St Thomas Christians.

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church grew to an autocephalous Orthodox Church which has become a member in the family of the

ed., *The Vienna Dialogue, Five Pro Oriente Consultations with Oriental Orthodoxy*, Kerala Regional Symposium, Kottayam October 1993, Booklet No. 6, Vienna, 1995, 123.

²²NN, "Editorial," *Star of the East* 3, 4 (1982) 1-2.

²³V.C. Samuel, "Our Church in History," *The Star of the East* 4 (1983) 23.

²⁴C.C. Cherian, *The People of God* (Believers in the Indian Orthodox Church), Kottayam: Divyabodhanam Publications, 1986, 89; K.M. George, "The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church: Historical Self-Understanding and Identity Some Ecumenical Considerations" (unpublished paper), 2011, 2.

²⁵Joseph Cheeran/K.V. Mammen Kottackal, *Malankara Sabhayum Syrian Patriarkeesanmarude Adhikara Durviniyogavum* (Church History), Kottayam: Kottackal Publishers, 2006, 19.

Oriental Orthodox Churches and the erection of the Catholicate in the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in 1912 crowned her endeavours to retain her autonomy without sacrificing the precious values of the *Mar Thoma Margam*.

2. The Hierarchical Structure of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and the Participation of the Laity in the Life of the Church

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church developed an Ecclesiology in which the ancient ecclesial traditions of the St Thomas Christians and the traditions of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch were blended. The hierarchical structure and the function of the hierarchy in the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church demonstrate the uniqueness of the ecclesial heritage of the St Thomas Christians, namely, the *Mar Thomas Margam*. The participation of the laity in the life of the Church, especially in the administration of the Church as well as in the election of the members of the hierarchy is ensured in the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church.

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church had a very sad history of development since the Coonan-Cross Oath in 1653. She underwent a long period of struggles, disputes, and oppression through colonial and ecclesial powers which left her in a crucial existential and identity crisis. Such a situation led to the absence of proper ecclesial orientation and structure based on the *Mar Thoma Margam*. Cheeran states that there was widespread protest against the rule of the bishops from the family of Pakalomattom.²⁶ Mar Thoma VI who originally hailed from the Catholic parish of Kuravilangadu made efforts for the reunion with the Catholic group of the St Thomas Christians several times in the 18th century, finally through Mar Joseph Kariyattil, in order to counter the dissensions arising in different places on account of the displeasure with the continuance of the Pakalomattom family tradition.²⁷

Mar Thoma VII gradually understood that the most suitable mode of administration for the Malankara Church would be a healthy mixture of episcopacy and democracy in the right proportions.²⁸ He made Kunnamkulam Pulikkottil Ittoop Malpaan and Kaayamkulam Philipose Ramban his advisors who had the freedom to disagree with the Bishop, and if necessary, even to admonish him. The era of the

²⁶Joseph Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, Kottayam: Kottackal Publishers, 2009, 182.

²⁷Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 182-183.

²⁸Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 209.

bishops of the Pakalomattam family who ruled the Malankara Church with proper authority through the valid laying on of hands from the apostolic times came to an end with the death of Mar Thoma VII and the ascent of Mar Thoma VIII, the new Pakalomattom adopted bishop, to the office of the Malankara Metropolitan in 1809.²⁹ A large majority of the people agitated against the uncanonical way in which Mar Thoma VIII became the Malankara Metropolitan.

The *Kandanaadu Padiyola* which was written in the Synod held at Kandanaadu in 1809 made the governance of the Malankara Church through Mar Thoma VIII subject to a set of clearly defined rules and regulations and to the advice of Pulikkottil Ittoop Ramban (Pulikkottil Joseph Mar Dionysius I) and Kayamkulam Philipose Ramban.³⁰ The silence of the *Kandanaadu Padiyola* on the tradition of the bishops of the Pakalomattom family becoming Malankara Metropolitan refers to the very change of attitude of the Malankara Church in the 19th century.³¹ That the *Kandanaadu Padiyola* was signed by all those who were assembled there including the laity showed the role of the laity to be re-installed in the Malankara Church.³² Being the highest legislative body it was the Malankara *Palliyogam* which assembled at Kandanaadu and formulated the *Kandanaadu Padiyola*. The *Kandanaadu Padiyola* defended and protected the democratic ideals and values of the Ecclesiology of the St Thomas Christians.³³ The *Kandanaadu Padiyola* can be described as the prototypical form of the Constitution of the Malankara Church.³⁴

However, Mar Thoma VIII violated the *Kandanaadu Padiyola*. He governed the Malankara Church according to his own whims and fancies and tried to ensure the Pakalomattom family tradition in the line of succession to the office of the Malankara Metropolitan.³⁵ Mar Thoma VIII passed away in 1816 after consecrating his uncle Iype Kaseesaa as Mar Thoma IX who being an old man immediately retired to Kadamattom in the absence of support either from the laity or from the civil government. The British authorities in India issued a royal decree and ordered the people and clergy to obey Pulikkottil

²⁹Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 209-210.

³⁰Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 213.

³¹Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 216.

³²Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 218.

³³M. Kurian Thomas, *Pathrose Pathriyarkeesinte Pariskarangal*, Kottayam: The Malankara Orthodox Church Publications, 2011, 49.

³⁴Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 213.

³⁵Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 219.

Joseph Mar Dionysius I as the Malankara Metropolitan instead of Mar Thoma IX.³⁶

The present system of the administration of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in which the participation of the laity is unique still remained a dream even in the reign of a Metropolitan from a non-Pakalomattam family in the beginning of the 19th century. The *Chattavaryola* is a more detailed and practical codex which was made based on the Kandanaadu Padiyola in 1853. The administration of the parishes and the role of the Malankara Metropolitan in the administration of the Church were among the themes dealt with in the *Chattavaryola*.³⁷

The epoch-making event of the convocation of the Parumala Synod during the reign of Pulikkottil Joseph Mar Dionysius in 1873 paved the way for a radical translation of the centuries-long desire of the laity to give the Malankara *Palliyogam* a canonical structure. The Parumala Synod noticed that the autocracy of the bishops was not beneficial for the Church. It was decided to constitute an administration group consisting of bishops, priests and laymen. This association should have a clearly defined structure and mandate. All the churches should be made members of that association; a fee should be collected from the church and the vicar should be made a member. The Malankara *Palliyogam* was transformed into the canonically structured Malankara Syrian Christian Association at the Parumala Synod. As a group for discussing matters and carrying out decisions, a committee should be elected with four priests and eight laymen as its members.³⁸

The Association should elect in advance, candidates for episcopal positions and arrange their training. A person whom the Metropolitan and the Association agree on, should be chosen as the Archadiyaakkon to be a helper to the Metropolitan. Students of theology will be ordained only if they are certified by the vicar, the parish general body, the committee and the Malpaans. The committee is being authorized to make rules as per the requirements of the times. The Association will have the power to remove any member of the committee who errs, after a trial, and to appoint another in his

³⁶Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 227 and 231.

³⁷Kurian Thomas, *Pathrose Pathriyarkeesinte Pariskarantal*, 50-51.

³⁸Kurian Thomas, *Pathrose Pathriyarkeesinte Pariskarantal*, 301-302; Baby Varghese, "Foreword," in Kurian Thomas, *Pathrose Pathriyarkeesinte Pariskarantal*, 13; Kurian Thomas, *Pathrose Pathriyarkeesinte Pariskarantal*, 53.

place.³⁹ The first meeting of the Malankara Syrian Christian Association was held on 26th Dhanu, 1873.⁴⁰

Peter III, Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, during his visit in the Malankara Church insisted that a synod should be convened under his chairmanship for the confirmation of the decisions taken at the Parumala Synod. The *Mulanthuruthy* Synod was convened in 1876 for this purpose. On the first day representatives from 62 parishes participated in the Synod; on the second day representatives from 150 parishes attended the synod and on the last day representatives from 103 churches remained to sign the document.⁴¹ The important canons of the *Mulanthuruthy* Synod which concern the administration of the Malankara Church are the following: The autocracy of the bishops should be stopped; there should be a common fund; the Syrian Christian Association should be formed for this purpose; A standing committee should be constituted with eight members of the Association, sixteen first class laymen and the Metropolitan as president. A Managing Committee should also be constituted.⁴²

Cheeran highlights the uniqueness of the Malankara Syrian Christian Association in the following words: "The Malankara Syrian Christian Association that was formed at Parumala in 1873, and was later confirmed at Mulanthuruthy in 1876, was the first community organization of Kerala. SNDP, NSS, Yogakshemasabha, MES, Pulayar Mahasabha and others which originated in Kerala drew their inspiration from this and this became a model for all of them."⁴³ According to Cheeran, the Association became the abstract image and the Kottayam Old Seminary became the concrete symbol of the

³⁹Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 302-304.

⁴⁰Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 305. Note: Dhanu is the name of the month in the traditional calendar of Kerala/India and corresponds to the English months December-January.

⁴¹Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 310.

⁴²Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 311-312.

⁴³Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 313. SNDP is an acronym for Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, a charitable society founded for the spiritual and educational uplift of Ezhava community, a backward ethnic group in Kerala/India; Nair Service Society (NSS) is an organization founded for the uplift and welfare of the Nair community in Kerala/India; Yogakshemasabha is the organization of the Namboodiri Bahmins of Kerala origin in India; MES is the Muslim Educational Society founded for aiding the education of Muslims in India, especially in Kerala; Pulayar Mahasabha is an organization founded for the uplift of the Pulayar who are untouchables in Hinduism in India.

Church. All the later developments of the Church drew their basic energy from these abstract and concrete symbols of the Church.⁴⁴

A meeting of the Malankara Syrian Christian Association was held at Parumala in 1878 under the chairmanship of Joseph Mar Dionysius II. New decisions were taken which corrected the arbitrary decisions of Patriarch Peter III. Metropolitan Joseph Mar Dionysius was made president of both the Association and the Church Managing Committee.⁴⁵ The endeavours of Pulikkottil Joseph Mar Dionysius II fulfilled the centuries-long longing of the Malankara Church to re-install the ancient tradition of the participation of the laity in the administration of the Church. Metropolitan Pulikkottil Joseph Mar Dionysius II is described as the first democratic prophet of the Kerala Church and culture. He threw away his episcopal autocracy, glory, love of position and pride, and jumped into his democratic style of functioning by going beyond his times. Cheeran appreciates the inestimable contribution made by Joseph Mar Dionysius II to the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church by re-instating the ancient practice of the three-fold streams of power in the Church, namely, episcopal-clerical-lay.⁴⁶

The following are the important levels of administration in the hierarchical structure of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church.

2.1. The Episcopal Synod: The Apex Body of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

In the hierarchical structure of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church the place of the episcopal synod is typical of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. Being the apex body of the Church the supreme authority is vested in the episcopal Synod of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. "All bishops are members of the episcopal synod. The Synod has authority to decide in matters of faith, order and discipline. If there is any accusation against the Catholicos, the Episcopal Synod can hear such accusations and make appropriate decisions."⁴⁷ It is the Episcopal Synod which issues official statements when it is in session.⁴⁸ "The Constitution of the Church clearly says

⁴⁴Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 313.

⁴⁵Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 327.

⁴⁶Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 338.

⁴⁷K.M. George, "The Indian Orthodox Organogram," in *The Vienna Dialogue Five Pro Oriente Consultations with Oriental Orthodoxy, On Primacy First Study Seminar*, June 1991, Booklet No. 4, Vienna, 1993, 63.

⁴⁸Paulose Mar Gregorios, "Ecclesiastical Authority Options and Patterns in the Indian Orthodox Church," *Star of the East* 1, 9 (1987) 4.

that the Episcopal Synod is the final authority in interpreting all matters of 'faith, order and discipline.' Social questions are seldom seen as falling within these categories."⁴⁹ The bishops of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church are elected by the Malankara Syrian Christian Association which consisted of a lay majority.

2.2. The Catholicos cum Malankara Metropolitan

The Catholicate in the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church is not an ancient institution, though the institution of the Malankara Metropolitan is an ancient apostolic institution established by St Thomas, the Apostle.⁵⁰ The St Thomas Christians thought it indispensable to establish a Catholicate as the perfection of the autocephalous status, governmental independence of the ancient Malankara Church for its independence, existence and historical prominence; the Malankara Church never thought of it during its hierarchical relation with the Church of the East. The Constitution of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church which was made in 1934 and was amended in 2006 states the nature of the Catholicate of the East: "The throne of Catholicos was re-established in AD 1912 in the Orthodox Syrian Church of the East, which includes the Malankara Church, and this institution has been functioning ever since in the Orthodox Syrian Church of the East" (99). "The powers of the Catholicos include the consecration of the Prelates, presiding over the Episcopal Synod, declaring its decisions and implementing them, conducting administration as representative of the Synod and consecrating the Holy Mooron" (100).⁵¹ According to the Constitution of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church the same person exercises the authority of the Malankara Metropolitan and of the Catholicos.

Catholicos Baselius Marthoma Didymos I (2005- 2010) of the MOSC emphasized the significance of the Catholicate: "Jathickukarthavyan," "Archadiakon," "Mar Thoma Episcopus," "Malankara Metropolitan" and "Catholicos of the East" are important offices in the growth of

⁴⁹Paulose Mar Gregorios, "Ecclesiastical Authority Options and Patterns in the Indian Orthodox Church," 4.

⁵⁰Geevarghese Mar Dioscoros, "Sabhacharithram," in Geevarghese Mar Osthathos, Mathews Mar Barnabas, Joseph Mar Pachomios and Geevarghese Mar Dioscoros, ed., *Malankara Orthodox Surianisabha Oru Padanam*, Kottayam: Malankara Orthodox Church Publications, 2011, 174-175, 207; Jacob Kurian, "Malankara Catholicate Shathabdichinthakal Catholica sthapanavum Malankara Sabhabharanaghadanayum: Oru bhavi parichinthanam," *Gregorian Mirror* 4 (2011) 14.

⁵¹Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church Constitution, As Amended in 2006, Kottayam: Malankara Orthodox Church Publications, 2011, 29.

this Church. The indigenous character, independence, and autocephaly of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church have become fortified fortresses through the erection of the Catholicate in 1912 and the strong constitution of the Church that came into effect in 1934. The Catholicate became an unchallengeable institution of the highest authority through the famous judgement of the Supreme Court of India in 1995. According to the judgement issued by the Supreme Court of India in 1995, the Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch does not have any temporal power in the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church; he can exercise spiritual power in the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in accordance with her Constitution. Moreover, the Catholicos of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church can exercise the spiritual powers of the Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch in the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church as per the Constitution.⁵² The Constitution of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (1934) became the law book for all the parishes and churches in the Malankara Church. The Catholicate of the East is not an institution that can be shared. The Catholicate of the East is an independent and sacred institution of authority like the thrones in Rome, Alexandria, Antioch or any other ancient throne elsewhere. There is no other higher authority over the Catholicos of the East other than the Almighty God. The Catholicos who is subject to any other ecclesial authority is not the Catholicos of the East. There is only one Catholicos of the East: the Catholicos who is the sole heir to the apostolic throne of St Thomas.⁵³ The Catholicos of the East is neither subject to any higher authority nor is a Maphrian. It has nothing to do with the history of the Persian Maphrianate.⁵⁴

The significance of the Catholicate of the East is highly esteemed by Mathews Mar Severios. He states that the Catholicate of the East is an Episcopal office that exists as the symbol of the national independence of the Indian Church which is worthy of claiming the apostolic succession of St Thomas, the Apostle. The titles of the supreme pastor of any other church, such as 'Patriarch', 'Archbishop' and 'Pope', are implied in the Malankara Catholicate which is entitled

⁵²K. Mathen, *Malankara Sabha Kesukalude Samagra Samaharam*, Kottayam: Kottackal Publishers, 2009, 692.

⁵³His Holiness Baselios Marthoma Didymos I, "Malankara Sabhaye Nee Bhagyavathiyakunnu," *Malankara Sabha* 12 (2008) 12.

⁵⁴Joesph Cheeran/K.V. Mammen/Jose Kurian Puliyeril, *Sathabdhi Kondadunna Catholicatinte Kalika Pradhanyam*, Kottayam: Kottackal Publishers, 2010, 126.

to autocephaly and apostolic succession. Therefore, it is unnecessary to add titles such as Patriarch, or Archbishop, or Pope to the title of the Catholicos.⁵⁵

The Catholicate of the East in India is the throne of St Thomas, the Apostle, who founded the Church of St Thomas Christians. The See of St Thomas is independent and autocephalous and there is no higher authority over the Catholicos of the East on earth. The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church is aware of the status of the Catholicos and is pledged to retain its independence and autocephaly at any cost. She has learnt a lesson from the passionate longing of the foreign colonial ecclesial authorities to subdue her.

The most remarkable feature of the Catholicate of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church is that the Catholicos himself is elected by the Malankara Syrian Christian Association which has a lay majority. The decisive role of the laity even in the election of the head of the Church reminds us of the apostolic times.

2.3. The Managing Committee

The Managing Committee is a small body to look into the financial and administrative affairs of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. The Synod at Mulamthuruthy made the provision for the managing committee at the time of the formation of the Malankara Association. The members are elected by the association, two priests and four lay people representing each diocese are elected for a period of five years. Other than the elected members, a proportionate number of members is nominated to the Managing Committee by the Malankara Metropolitan. The members of the Working Committee are also members of the Managing Committee.⁵⁶ "The Managing Committee which includes all members of the Episcopal Synod has a majority of lay membership. The managing committee manages the affairs of the Church as a whole."⁵⁷ The laity form the majority of the members of the Managing Committee which looks into the financial and administrative matters of the Church.

⁵⁵Mathews Mar Severios, "Nammude Catholicatinu Anupama Sthanam," Foreword to Joseph Cheeran/K.V. Mammen/Jose Kurian Puliyeril, *Sathabधि Kondadunna Catholicatinte Kalika Pradhanyam*, 3.

⁵⁶<http://mosc.in/administration/the-managing-committee>, 26.03.2016.

⁵⁷K.M. George, "The Indian Orthodox Organogram," in *Pro Oriente, The Vienna Dialogue Five Pro Oriente Consultations with Oriental Orthodoxy, On Primacy First Study Seminar*, June 1991, Booklet No. 4, Vienna, 1993, 64.

2.4. The Malankara Association

The Mulamthuruthy synod which was summoned by Patriarch Peter III in 1876 confirmed the elected body called the Malankara Syrian Christian Association for the management and control of all the religious and social concerns of the whole Church.⁵⁸ "Every parish elects a priest and two laymen to the Association, which includes the Episcopal synod. This supreme representative body of the whole church is presided over by the Catholicos. A Lay Trustee and a Priest Trustee appointed by the Association together with the Catholicos cum Malankara Metropolitan manage the assets of the Church. There is an elected lay secretary for the Association (around 2600 members)."⁵⁹ Now the representation of the lay people is based on the number of parishioners. The Malankara Metropolitan is the president and the bishops having administrative charge of a diocese shall be vice-presidents of the association. The association is the body that elects the members of the managing committee, bishops and the Catholicos cum Malankara Metropolitan.⁶⁰

2.5. The Working Committee

It is a small body of members nominated by the Malankara Metropolitan. This body prepares the agenda for the Managing Committee and helps the Malankara Metropolitan in his administrative functions. The same body is also known as the Advisory Council.⁶¹

2.6. The Diocesan Assembly

The nature, constitution and representation of the Diocesan Assembly throw light on the role of the laity at the diocesan level:

Every parish assembly elects the vicar and two lay members to the Diocesan assembly. The Diocesan assembly elects for three years two priests and four lay members to the Diocesan council together with the Diocesan secretary. The Diocesan Metropolitan presides over the meetings of the assembly and the council (Some dioceses now elect adult female members to the council).⁶²

2.7. The Parish Assembly (and the Parish Managing Committee)

The Parish Assembly is the organization at grass-roots level in the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. The representation of the laity at grass-roots level points to the ecclesial spirit in the early Church.

⁵⁸<http://mosc.in/administration/malankara-association>, 26.03.2016.

⁵⁹K.M. George, "The Indian Orthodox Organogram," 64.

⁶⁰<http://mosc.in/administration/malankara-association>, 26.03.2016.

⁶¹<http://mosc.in/administration/the-working-committee>, 26.03.2016.

⁶²K.M. George, "The Indian Orthodox Organogram," 63.

Every parish has an assembly consisting of all adult male members. The assembly, presided over by the vicar, manages all the affairs of the parish. The assembly annually elects a parish managing committee and a lay-steward who is the joint-steward along with the vicar of all the assets of the parish. (Some parishes have begun to elect adult female members to the parish managing committee).⁶³

Conclusion

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church paid a huge price for the re-establishment of the ancient system of the ecclesial government. The united efforts of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church for a few centuries in the midst of long struggles, unauthorized foreign interventions, concurrences, divisions, and chaos have proved not to be futile. The role of the laity in the ecclesial life has been clearly defined within the framework of synods and approved and accepted unanimously by the whole Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church.

The high democratic ideals and democratic parliamentary system of governance of the 20th century were already fully realized in the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in the 19th century on the model of the early Church in the apostolic times as well as on the unique system of *Palliyogam* in the ancient ecclesial heritage of the St Thomas Christians known as the *Mar Thoma Margam*.⁶⁴ If I borrowed two terms from the theology of Yves Congar, namely, 'hierarchology' and 'laicology',⁶⁵ the hierarchical structure of the MOSC would reflect a harmonious synthesis of the hierarchology and laicology. The laicology of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church has immensely contributed to the Asian Christian heritage and offers a wonderful model of the blending of the hierarchical structure and the ecclesial functions of the laity in the Universal Church.

⁶³K.M. George, "The Indian Orthodox Organogram," 63.

⁶⁴Cheeran, *The Indian Orthodox Church of St Thomas (AD 52-2009)*, 338

⁶⁵Elizabeth Teresa Groppe, *Yves Congar's Theology of the Holy Spirit*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 137-139.