

INDIGENOUS STRUCTURES OF GOVERNANCE OF THE CHURCH OF ST. THOMAS CHRISTIANS IN INDIA

BennyTharakkunnel CMI*

Being the only Church in India until the arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, the Church of St. Thomas Christians founded in the second half of the first century, had the autonomy and the freedom to develop its own system of governance for spiritual and temporal administration and resolution of conflicts without any territorial or hierarchical restrictions. Though this Church became hierarchically dependent on the Persian Church from the fourth century it had the administrative self-sufficiency to decide for itself under the guidance of the indigenous ecclesiastical leader called archdeacon who governed the Church with legislative, executive and judicial powers with the help of *Yogams*. However, after the arrival of Western missionaries, gradually Latin jurisdiction and Latin laws were imposed on the St. Thomas Christians by taking away all its powers and abolishing all its indigenous structures, leading to a complete loss of autonomy for this Church. Since the end of Latin rule, with the erection of three vicariates with native bishops in 1896, the Church has been gradually regaining its lost autonomy and is in the process of restoring the indigenous structures to the maximum possible extent.

Introduction

After its founding by St. Thomas the Apostle, the Church of St. Thomas Christians in India developed its own system of spiritual and temporal governance. The development of this system can be divided into three historical phases, each characterized by a different level of autonomy. The first period, from the first to the sixteenth century, can

* Benny Sebastian Tharakkunnel, born at Murikkassery, Kerala, India in 1972 and ordained in 2002 is a Syro-Malabar Catholic priest belonging to the congregation, Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI). Besides having a doctorate in Oriental Canon Law from Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome he holds a Master's degree in Physics from Bangalore University. At present he is serving as assistant professor at the Institute of Oriental Canon Law, director of Dharmaram Academy of Distance Education (DADE) and as a judge at the eparchial tribunal of Mandya.

be called the pre-Latin era. During that time, this Church freely developed indigenous administrative, judicial, and executive structures without territorial restrictions. The second period, the Latin era which began in the 16th century is characterized by a complete loss of the aforementioned autonomy. As a result of the concerted efforts by the Portuguese Padroado, Latin jurisdiction and laws were imposed on the Church of St. Thomas Christians, abrogating its indigenous structures of governance. A third period, the post-Latin and current era, began with the erection of three vicariates and appointment of native bishops to govern them in 1896. The current era is notable for the gradual restoration of this Church's earlier autonomy¹ and the elevation of this Church to major-archiepiscopal status has marked an important milestone in the life of this vibrant Church.

1. Concept of Autonomy and Individuality of a Church *sui iuris*

To understand the sort of autonomy enjoyed by the Syro-Malabar Church throughout its two thousand year long history, one must have a clear idea about the notion of ecclesial autonomy. If autonomy is "the freedom for a country, a region or an organization to govern itself independently" or "the ability to make decisions without being controlled by anyone else,"² then an autonomous Church is empowered to act decisively through its own structures and without the intervention of external authorities. Since such autonomy must be exercised according to divine and ecclesiastical law, it does not diminish the supreme authority of the Roman Pontiff, who always and everywhere has the right to intervene in ecclesial matters. Here it is necessary to distinguish between autonomous and autocephalous Churches. The latter are headed by internally elected patriarchs who organize their Churches in cooperation with local ecclesiastical

¹ Mathew Madappallikunnel in his doctoral dissertation, *The Tribunals of a Major Archiepiscopal Church* divides the two thousand year old history of the Syro-Malabar Church into five phases. They are 1) the Indian period, 2) the Chaldeo-Indian Period (345-1599) 3) the period of Latin domination (1498-1896), 4) the indigenous hierarchal period (1896-1992) and 5) the Major Archiepiscopal period. Cfr. Mathew Madappallikunnel, *The Tribunals of a Major Archiepiscopal Church* (Romae: Pontificia Universitas Sanctae Crucis, 1999).

² *New Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary* (Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2005) 89.

synods.³ In contrast, autonomous Churches enjoy full organizational and administrative freedom while depending on another, central Church in certain jurisdictional matters.⁴ In the Catholic communion, patriarchal and major archiepiscopal Churches are subject to the Roman Pontiff and the universal laws of the Catholic Church. Therefore, these Churches are considered autonomous and not autocephalous.⁵

2. Pre-Latin Era: A Period of Autonomy without Territorial Restrictions

The Church of St. Thomas Christians, which received the gospel from the apostle St. Thomas in the first century, was the only Church in India until the Portuguese missionaries arrived in the sixteenth century. It can be reasonably assumed that the law of this Church, cut off from the European West until then, was the Law of the Church in India. It can further be assumed that this Church was neither bound by any territorial restrictions nor subject to any higher ecclesiastical authority in exercising legislative, executive and judicial power.

Like all apostolic Churches, the Indian Church developed its own system of governance. This development occurred far from the Roman Empire and the Church of Rome, forcing the Indian Church to rely upon local elements and freeing it from European political concerns. As Koodappuzha writes, the Indian Church's "existence outside the Graeco-Roman world has helped her to safeguard the uniqueness of the early Christian traditions free from the politico-religious reality of the Roman Empire."⁶ Being "free from the fear and favour of the imperial power," this Church "could preserve the authentic early traditions undisturbed and uninterrupted."⁷ The three-tiered system of *Yogams*, discussed below, originated in this way.

Like all evangelized areas, India received the substance of the Christian faith in a unique socio-cultural environment:

³ Mesrob K. Krikorian, "Autonomy and Autocephaly in the Theory and Practice of the Ancient Oriental Churches," *Kanon* 5(1981), 114-129 at p. 114.

⁴ Mesrob K. Krikorian, "Autonomy and Autocephaly...", 114.

⁵ Georgică Grigoriță, *Il Concetto di Ecclesia sui iuris* (Roma: Pontificia Università Gregoriana 2007) 43-45.

⁶ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India* (Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies India, 1998) 18-19.

⁷ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India*, *Christianity* 66.

The first Christians of India, who responded to the Apostle Thomas in their particular socio-cultural environment, began to exercise their faith through many local practices. This gave rise to their particular customs, traditions, privileges and norms- their particular law, which in course of time was named 'the Law of Thomas'.⁸

While this process resulted in the St. Thomas Christians having a distinctly Indian ecclesial identity, this Church ultimately could not develop a purely Indian governance system.⁹ After becoming subject to the East Syrian Church, the Indian Church began to enrich the Law of Thomas with Persian Christian elements.¹⁰ The first Synod of Mar Isaac, held in 410, required every metropolitan bishop to possess a copy of the synodal canons for use in governing,¹¹ and the East Syrian bishops who came to Malabar undoubtedly brought disciplinary codes like the *Synadicon* and the 'Nomocanon of Ebed Jesus' with them.¹² Nevertheless, such laws were normative only "whenever local laws or usages were wanting in particular cases."¹³ It is difficult to assess how Seleucian legal sources, most of them burned after the Synod of Diamper, influenced Malabar ecclesial life.¹⁴ Given that the Indian Church maintained a distinct *sui iuris* identity¹⁵ and developed its own norms suited to Indian culture, one can assume that the Church of St. Thomas Christians were not entirely subject to Seleucian laws. As Koodappuzha writes, "only in those matters in which the local usages and practices had no provision that they relied on the Seleucian laws."¹⁶ Since these laws were self-imposed for the sake of enriching

⁸ Andrews Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of the Syro-Malabar Church* (Kottayam: St. Joseph's Press, 1987) 6-7; Law of Thomas can be translated into Malayalam as "Thomayude Margam".

⁹ Andrews Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 13.

¹⁰ Andrews Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 13.

¹¹ George Nedungatt, *Laity and Church Temporalities: Appraisal of a Tradition* (Bangalore: Dharamaram Publications, 2000) 116-117.

¹² Andrews Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 310.

¹³ Placid Joseph Podipara, *The Canonical Sources of the Syro-Malabar Church* (Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, 1986) 66.

¹⁴ Andrews Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 7.

¹⁵ Benedict Vadakkekara, "The Synod of Diamper in Historical Perspective," in George Nedungatt (ed.), *The Synod of Diamper Revisited* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale 2001) 37-76.

¹⁶ Xavier Koodapuzha, "The History of the Church in Kerala in the Pre-Portuguese Period," in George Menachery (ed.), *The St. Thomas Christian*

spirituality and discipline, "the disciplinary heritage of the Pre-Portuguese period was a happy blending of these two strands of sources"¹⁷ and in no way diminished the autonomy of the Indian Church.

3. Apostolic Origin and the Distinct Judicial Identity of the Syro-Malabar Church

The Church of St. Thomas Christians bases its identity on its direct evangelization by the Apostle Thomas.¹⁸ Thus, as Paul Pallath states, she "was not a daughter Church, nor a ramification of the Church of the East in the Persian Empire."¹⁹ Pride in this direct connection to the apostles helped perpetuate this distinct identity and hierarchy even under the Persian Church²⁰: "When Malabar gloried in its origin from the Apostle St. Thomas, Seleucia's glory was only that it has as its apostle a disciple of the disciple of St. Thomas".²¹ Consequently, when Portuguese missionary efforts neglected and attempted to replace this heritage, the St. Thomas Christians felt compelled to resist.²²

4. Juridical Status in the First Three Centuries

According to tradition, St. Thomas the Apostle ordained rulers to govern the Indian Church that he had founded.²³ As Mathias Mundadan puts it, "The tradition of the apostolic origin of the community would naturally imply that Thomas gave to the first Indian Christian community a way of worship and a hierarchal, judicial and administrative system more or less adapted to local

Encyclopaedia of India, vol. II (Trichur: The St. Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India, 1982) 29-32, at p. 32.

¹⁷ Andrews Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 6-7.

¹⁸ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India* (Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 2005) 31.

¹⁹ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 31.

²⁰ Varkey Vithayathil, *The Origin and Progress of the Syro-Malabar Hierarchy* (Kottayam: St. Thomas Apostolic Seminary, 1980) 17-19.

²¹ Placid Joseph Podipara, *The Canonical Sources of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 64.

²²Xavier Koodapuzha, *Faith and Communion of the Indian Church of the Saint Thomas Christians* (Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies India, 1982) 159-160.

²³ Placid Joseph Podipara, *The Hierarchy of the Syro-Malabar Church* (Alleppey: Prakasham Publications, 1976) 24.

needs.”²⁴ It is believed that St. Thomas “who had disseminated the Christian faith in South India, also ordained sacred ministers - deacons, presbyters and bishops - to succeed him in the Christian communities founded by him.”²⁵ *Ramban Patt*, a folk song popular among the St. Thomas Christians, speaks of the ordination of two bishops named Kepha (Peter) and Paul by the apostle Thomas.²⁶ A Malabar tradition also attests that St. Thomas ordained bishops and priests from the Pakalomattam family.²⁷

Ultimately, a rupture in ecclesial communion led to organizational problems within the St. Thomas Christians. Once the bishops and priests ordained by St. Thomas had died, the faithful of this Church most likely found it difficult to organize themselves. Thus, while Panthaneus of Alexandria could speak of finding Christians in India at the end of the second century, no evidence proves the existence of an organized hierarchy at that time.²⁸ Most likely, an “organizational and administrative framework of its own, most probably in imitation of the local non-Christian practices,” had already emerged as a result of the circumstances.²⁹ The problems caused by broken apostolic succession would not be ameliorated until the onset of relations with the Persian Church in the 4th century. Until then, the Indian Church was forced to operate without bishops and priests for many years.

²⁴ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Indian Christians' Search for Identity & Struggle for Autonomy* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1984) 23.

²⁵ Paul Pallath, *The Provincial Councils of Goa and the Church of St. Thomas Christians* (Kerala, India: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies India, 2005) 29-30; cfr. Placid Joseph Podipara, *The Hierarchy of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 24; cfr. Jacob Kollaparambil, “Sources on the Hierarchical Structure of the St. Thomas Christian Church in the Pre-Diamper Period,” in Bosco Puthur (ed.), *The Life and Nature of the St. Thomas Christian Church in the Pre-Diamper Period* (Kochi: Liturgical Research Center of the Syro-Malabar Church, Mount St. Thomas, 2000) 161-163.

²⁶ Andrews Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 4.

²⁷ Varkey Vithayathil, *The Origin and Progress*, 14. He notes that “However according to another tradition as contained in the Leyden University, the apostle ordained only priests and not bishops in Malabar”.

²⁸ Varkey Vithayathil, *The Origin and Progress*, 14.

²⁹ Jose Porunnedam, “Major Archiepiscopal Curia of the Syro Malabar Church History and Organization,” in Francis Elavathingal (ed.), *Syro-Malabar Church Since the Eastern Code* (Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 2002) 86-99, at p. 87.

5. Hierarchical Dependence on the Chaldean Church without Losing Autonomy (345-1599)

Why did the Church of St. Thomas Christians, founded by an apostle have to hierarchically depend on a Church founded by a disciple of that apostle?³⁰ Paul Pallath explains the motives behind this apparently contradictory arrangement:

The hierarchical communion of the Church of St. Thomas Christians with the primate or patriarch of the Churches in the Persian Empire became a necessity, because of the legislation of the early ecumenical councils and general synods which exclusively reserved the election of bishops to the provincial synod canonically convoked and presided over by the metropolitan. In normal circumstances no Episcopal consecration was possible without the presence of the metropolitan and two other bishops or at least three bishops with the written consent of the metropolitan.³¹ Similarly the metropolitans had to be ordained by the "catholicos" or Patriarch. Therefore, in its early years the small Indian Church which did not have a metropolitan and a provincial synod could not have canonically elected and consecrated bishops without depending on its sister Churches.³²

It is not certain when this hierarchical relationship began. When Cosmos Indicopleustes visited India around 535, Persian bishops were already governing Malabar.³³ The Synod of Markabt (424 A.D.) was especially important in this regard, as it marked the moment at which "the Catholicos Dadisho of Seleucia proclaimed his independence

³⁰ Tradition holds that St. Thomas on his way to India founded the first Christian community in Persia. The Church in Edessa also shares the same apostolic tradition because it was founded by Mar Addai, a disciple of St. Thomas. Whereas the Church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon owes its origin to Mar Mari, a disciple of Mar Addai.

³¹ Apostolic Canon I (cfr. Henry Robert Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, vol. 14, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979, 594); Council of Nicaea (325) cc. 4,6; Synod of Antioch (341) cc. 16, 19, 23 (For the English version of Synod of Antioch cfr. Henry Robert Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils ...*, 105-121); Carthage (419) c. 13 (For the English version see Henry Robert Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils...*, 448); Nicaea II (887) c.3; Constantinople IV (869-870) c. 22.

³² Paul Pallath, *The Provincial Councils of Goa*, 31.

³³ Varkey Vithayathil, *The Origin and Progress*, 17.

from the Antiochean Patriarchate and began to be called Patriarch."³⁴ With this event, the territory of Malabar and Persian bishops outside the Roman Empire became subject to the Patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.³⁵ This hierarchical relationship continued until the death of Mar Abraham, the last Chaldean metropolitan, in 1597.³⁶

While this relationship endured, canonical headship of the St. Thomas Christians officially belonged to the patriarch of the Church of the East. This headship, which primarily concerned matters of Episcopal orders, excluded acts of jurisdiction and administration.³⁷ The patriarch merely appointed and consecrated the metropolitan of the Indian Church,³⁸ who himself exercised the *munus sanctificandi* without intervening in administration or temporal affairs.³⁹ Practical headship of the St. Thomas Christians actually belonged to a figure called the "archdeacon of all India." This celibate Indian priest possessed legislative, judicial and administrative power of governance,⁴⁰ which he exercised with the assistance of a general assembly (*yogam*).⁴¹ This arrangement allowed the Church of St. Thomas Christians to develop an administrative system distinct from that of the Persian Church, and therefore to preserve its autonomy and distinct ecclesiastical identity.⁴²

From 340 until about 379, under Sapor II, many Persian Christians fled to India to escape persecution. The most significant emigration occurred at Kodungallur, when the merchant Knai Thomman arrived with a ship carrying a bishop, several priests, some deacons and about 400 Christians.⁴³ This arrival opened channels of communication with the Persian Church, which were subsequently strengthened by the arrival of even more refugees.⁴⁴ These immigrants, who shared the

³⁴ Varkey Vithayathil, *The Origin and Progress*, 17.

³⁵ Varkey Vithayathil, *The Origin and Progress*, 17.

³⁶ Paul Pallath, "The Syro-Malabar Church: Juridical Status and Synodal Functioning", in Francis Elavathingal (ed.) *Syro-Malabar Church Since the Eastern Code* (Mannuthy: Marymatha Publications, 2003) 30-56, at p. 31.

³⁷ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 11.

³⁸ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 11-12.

³⁹ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 12.

⁴⁰ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 11-13; Jacob Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of all India: A Historico-Juridical Study* (Kottayam: Catholic Bishop's House, 1972) 187-205.

⁴¹ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 31.

⁴² Xavier Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India*, 24.

⁴³ Varkey Vithayathil, *The Origin and Progress*, 15.

⁴⁴ Varkey Vithayathil, *The Origin and Progress*, 16.

same rite, language and apostolic heritage, gradually became part of the community of St. Thomas Christians in India. Over time, Indian Christians incorporated many Persian elements to strengthen their spiritual life, hierarchical and disciplinary systems. However, as Cardinal Eugene Tisserant rightly observes, Persian influence did not obscure the distinct identity of the St. Thomas Christians:

But the Malabar Christians, who were living in a land of ancient civilization with strongly rooted customs, obviously did not follow the same pattern of life as their co-religionist of Mesopotamia. Moreover, since social and religious life in the East are closely interdependent, it was not surprising that popular customs, religious practices, prescriptions of Canon Law, and local, private laws were all related with one another.⁴⁵

In short, as Kollaparambil puts it, it can be affirmed that "the Church of India in the course of first fifteen centuries developed an identity of her own with relative autonomy and self-rule in the universal Church."⁴⁶ This identity was shaped by the local Malabar tradition on the secular level and by Chaldean elements on the ecclesiastical.⁴⁷

6. The Role of the Archbishop and the Power of the Archdeacon

From the 4th century to the 16th, the archbishops and archdeacons of the Church of St. Thomas Christians played a unique role in Christianity. In other Churches, true authority within an eparchy largely resided with its bishop. In the Indian Church, however, the metropolitan became 'the Metropolitan and the Gate of India' and the archdeacon "the prince" of all the Christians of St. Thomas.⁴⁸

As noted above, the Chaldean patriarch was a figure-head practically limited to consecrating Chaldean bishops for the Indian Church.⁴⁹ The competence of the Chaldean metropolitans and bishops themselves acted only as spiritual heads⁵⁰ with their competence "practically limited to the exercise of the powers of Episcopal order and to a

⁴⁵ Eugène Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity in India: a History of the Syro-Malabar Church from Earliest Time to the Present Day* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1957) 163.

⁴⁶ Jacob Kollaparambil, *The St. Thomas Christians' Revolution in 1653* (Kottayam: The Catholic Bishop's House, 1981) 1.

⁴⁷ Jacob Kollaparambil, *The St. Thomas Christians' Revolution in 1653*, 1.

⁴⁸ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Indian Christians' Search for Identity ...*, 14-16.

⁴⁹ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 12.

⁵⁰ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 12.

general vigilance in matters canonical and liturgical.”⁵¹ Unlike other metropolitans, these figures never interfered in Church administration or temporal affairs.⁵² A local prelate, the archdeacon,⁵³ “practically governed the Church except in matters that needed the exercise of Episcopal power.”⁵⁴ These clerics were considered “the unquestioned defenders of the Law of Thomas and their legitimate ecclesial heritage.”⁵⁵ Even if the Church of St. Thomas Christians at times had multiple bishops, there was never more than a single archdeacon.⁵⁶ Thus, this Church was always united under the guidance of a one, undisputed leader. Koodapuzha speaks of the dignity and importance of the archdeacon:

In the ecclesiastical systems of the St. Thomas Christians the position of the Archdeacon was of unique importance. He was the indigenous head of the Christian community known as *Jathikku karthavvian*⁵⁷, having the title *Archdeacon of All India*. As the head of the community there could be only one Archdeacon at a time while there was no such limitation in the number of their bishops. The Seleucian Patriarch addresses the Archdeacon of the Thomas Christians as the “Head of the Faithful in India.”⁵⁸

Between 1576 and 1581, Pope Gregory XIII (1572-85) addressed five papal briefs to the archdeacon that acknowledged the traditional dignity, position and responsibility of his position.⁵⁹ A 17th century report by Giuseppe Sebastini, an Italian Carmelite priest and apostolic commissary, further demonstrates the uniqueness of the archdeacon’s position:

⁵¹ Jacob Kollaparambil, *The St. Thomas Christians’ Revolution in 1653*, 5-6.

⁵² Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 12.

⁵³ Varkey Vithayathil., *The Origin and Progress*, 16.

⁵⁴ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 13.

⁵⁵ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India*, 75.

⁵⁶ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India*, 75; At the time of the Archdeacon Ittikuriath, there were several Chaldean bishops in India and five of them met at Kodungallur in 1504 (cfr. Jacob Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, 82).

⁵⁷ A document which had remained in the possession of the Pothanikkat family (Kothamangalam, Kerala) calls the archdeacon of 1509 Jathikku Karthavian, i.e., the one who is the lord of, or who is responsible for the community (cfr. A. Mathias Mundadan, *Indian Christians’ Search for Identity*, 16-17).

⁵⁸ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India*, 75.

⁵⁹ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India*, 75.

Among the Christians of St. Thomas, the position of the Archdeacon is next to the Archbishop. It is a very ancient privileged position which comes down in succession from the same family. It is a great dignity as it is according to the Greek Church. There is no other indigenous dignity secular or religious, greater than the Archdeacon who is considered to be the prince and Head of the St. Thomas Christians.⁶⁰

The archdeacon clearly enjoyed extensive authority, prestige and privilege before Western missionaries arrived in India. Admittedly, some may find it difficult to imagine a non-Episcopal figure who possessed more extensive day-to-day administrative authority in an eparchy than does the eparchial bishop himself. In the following passage, Mathias Mundadan explains why the Archdeacon of All India had more extensive powers than his East-Syrian counterparts:

As regards the archdeacon of all India, he was vested with even greater authority than the East-Syrian archdeacon, owing to the special organizational structure of the Church of India, namely the East-Syrian metropolitans at the head of the hierarchy were foreigners in a new land quite different from theirs in language, customs, religious beliefs, socio-political set up and so on. For governing the Church, he had to depend almost fully on his assistant, the indigenous archdeacon. These circumstances gave the archdeacon a free hand in the government of this Church and enabled him to exercise the whole jurisdiction. Thus the archdeacons enjoyed great authority among the Christians of St. Thomas in India.⁶¹

As Paul Pallath writes, "In the particular historical and ecclesiastical context of that time the Metropolitan-Archdeacon combination helped to streamline the effective organization and governance of the Indian Metropolitan Church."⁶² Only within this historical context can one understand how the Syro-Malabar Church maintained its own hierarchical constitution and ecclesiastical identity without actually

⁶⁰ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India*, 76.

⁶¹ A. Mathias Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India, Vol. 1, From the Beginning to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (up to 1542)* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India) 1984, 181.

⁶² Paul Pallath, *The Provincial Councils of Goa*, 34.

becoming part of the Chaldean Church upon which it was hierarchically dependent.⁶³

7. Different Indigenous Structures of Conflict Resolution

The tribunal system is new to the Syro-Malabar Church, but it had a unique justice system through the three forms of its *Yogams* (assemblies): *Palliyogam* (Parish assembly); *Desiyayogam* (Regional Assembly); and *Maha yogam*, *Pothuyogam* or *Sabhayogam* (General assembly).⁶⁴ Until the sixteenth century, justice was administered under the leadership of the archdeacon⁶⁵ and through the *Yogams*:

In the past the “Thomas Christians” had formed a kind of ‘Christian Republic’ and had developed the system of *yogam* or assembly for the governance of their community. At the parish level it was called *palliyogam*; it was the assembly of the heads of the important families under the presidency of the senior priest of the parish. The *yogam* judged all cases, settled all differences and even meted out the serious punishment of ex-communication. In serious cases, a regional *yogam* called *desiyayogam* with representatives of various Churches or parishes was often constituted for administration of justice. The Church general assembly which was also called *Maha yogam*, *Pothuyogam* or *Sabhayogam* (General assembly), *Samudaya yogam* or *Malankara Edavaka yogam*, with representatives of all the parishes under the leadership of the head of the community called the “archdeacon” decided on the matters common to the Church.⁶⁶

The development of the *Yogams* is analogous to that of the ancient synods and ecclesial assemblies, which confronted serious problems that one bishop could not resolve by himself.⁶⁷ A provincial synod, an assembly of a province’s bishops convoked and presided over by the metropolitan, enjoyed electoral, legislative, judicial and administrative

⁶³ Varkey Vithayathil, *The Origin and Progress*, 18.

⁶⁴ Andrews Thazhath, “The Superior and Ordinary Tribunals of a *Sui Iuris* Eastern Catholic Church,” *Studia Canonica*, 29 (1995), 375-396, at p. 379-380.

⁶⁵ An ancient Padiyola (a document written on palm leaves) clearly states that the Archdeacon of the Thomas Christians had the power to judge ecclesiastical affairs (cfr. A. M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India, Vol. I*, 183).

⁶⁶ Andrews Thazhath, “Administration of Justice in the Syro-Malabar Church,” in Francis Eluvathingal (ed.), *Syro-Malabar Church Since the Eastern Code*, 57-85, at p. 66.

⁶⁷ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 20.

powers in the same province.⁶⁸ Such a provincial synod was not possible in the early Indian context, which often saw a single bishop or even no bishop.⁶⁹ To obviate the difficulties of such a situation, the Indian Eastern Church of St. Thomas developed the *palliyogam* (Church-assembly). This quasi-synodal system enjoyed most of the powers of ancient provincial synods, save for the election of bishops.⁷⁰

Except for the right of Episcopal election and consecration, the archdeacon and the *yogam* together possessed an autonomy practically equal to that of a patriarchal Church. In the words of the Carmelite missionary Paulino, "These Christians constitute a kind of Christian civil republic. When the rights of a particular parish is threatened, other parishes come together to defend it. The parish priest and elders judge and settle all cases."⁷¹ Now, we will examine in detail the functioning of the three varieties of these assemblies, namely, the parish *yogam*, regional *yogam* and the general *yogam*.

7.1. *Palliyogam* (Parish Assembly)

The parish assembly, or *palliyogam*, was an adaptation of the ancient system of local government in Malabar.⁷² It was a local assembly of the heads of the Christian families and the clergy of the *edavaka* (parish), held under the leadership of the senior priest, to discuss all matters connected with the life and activities of the parish and to take decisions.⁷³ All parishioners and priests were bound by decisions that this assembly made regarding matters within its competence.

The assembly enjoyed legislative, administrative and judicial powers within the parish.⁷⁴ The legislative and executive power of the parish is evident in the competence of its assembly (*edavaka yogam*) to decide matters connected with selection and approval of the candidates for the priesthood, financial administration etc. Judicial autonomy can likewise be seen in competence over punishment of public sinners, reconciliation in times of conflicts etc. being attributed to the

⁶⁸ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 20.

⁶⁹ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 20.

⁷⁰ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 20.

⁷¹ Paulino da S. Bartolomeo, *Viaggio alle Indie Orientali* (Romae: Typis Salomonianis, 1794) 137; Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 20.

⁷² Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 21.

⁷³ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India*, 71.

⁷⁴ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 20.

Palliyogam.⁷⁵ The assembly could even excommunicate public delinquents and sinners, and impose penances necessary for the censure to be remitted.⁷⁶

7.2. *Desiyayogam* (Regional Assembly)

While the parish *yogam* handled spiritual and temporal matters of parish administration and justice, competence over important matters of common interest belonged to a common assembly of different parishes.⁷⁷ Such an assembly, which consisted of priests and Christian faithful representing a region of at least four parishes,⁷⁸ was called a regional *yogam*. As Thomas Paremmakal wrote in his book *Varthamanappusthakam*, "according to the ancient custom of the Malabar Church, no punishments could be inflicted until the crime was proved before the representatives of four Churches."⁷⁹ In short, "no punishment would be meted out for any grave crime until the representatives of four Churches had heard the case and pronounced their judgment to that effect."⁸⁰ In addition to protecting against unjust and arbitrary punishment of innocent persons, this requirement also promoted ecclesial communion and effective administration of justice.

7.3. *Mahayogam, Pothuyogam* or *Sabhayogam* (General Assembly)

Matters pertaining to the whole community were decided by the *Mahayogam*⁸¹- the assembly of the priests and representatives of the Christian faithful of all the parishes of the Church of St. Thomas Christians convoked and presided over by the archdeacon of all India.⁸² The extent of autonomy enjoyed by the Church of St. Thomas Christians is clearly evident in the assembly's supreme legislative, judicial and administrative powers, which were effective without

⁷⁵ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India*, 71.

⁷⁶ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 20-21.

⁷⁷ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India*, 71.

⁷⁸ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 21.

⁷⁹ Thomas Paremmakal, *The Varthamanappusthakam* (Roma: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1971) 41.

⁸⁰ Thomas Paremmakal, *The Varthamanappusthakam*, 46.

⁸¹ Thomas Paremmakal in *The Varthamanappusthakam* stated: "In all the things mentioned above the Malabar Churches acted rightly as their forefathers used to do in the past. Matters pertaining to the whole community were not decided by one or two Churches: all the Churches used to assemble together to deal with such matters." (cfr. Thomas Paremmakal, *The Varthamanappusthakam*, 33)

⁸² Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 22.

approval by a higher authority.⁸³ In the introduction to *Varthamanappusthakam*, Podipara clearly describes the competence of the general assembly:

Matters pertaining to the whole-Church or community - religious, social and political - were handled by the representatives of all the Churches. It was in these General-Church-assemblies (the Malabar Church Yogam) that the Archdeacon, the Jathikukarthavian (the one responsible for the community) as he was popularly called, played his part in the most conspicuous way. The General-Church-assemblies were practically supreme, and de facto no higher ecclesiastical authority questioned their decisions. The Thomas Christians therefore formed, as it were a Christian Republic with a head from among themselves. Their bishops who were foreigners were eclipsed by, or were under the shadow of the Archdeacons. Such was the canonical set up that developed among the St. Thomas Christians of the past. Because of this "autonomous state" and "oneness" no foreign heresy or religious controversy had any impact on them.⁸⁴

The decisions of the general assembly were final. A study of the competence and functioning of the *yogams* clearly shows that the Church of St. Thomas Christians enjoyed absolute autonomy until Latin rule was imposed on them against their wishes⁸⁵ and the Western way of administration gradually came into practice among them.⁸⁶

8. Loss of Distinct Identity and Autonomy under Latin Domination

Clearly, before Portuguese missionaries arrived in India, the Church of St. Thomas Christians had developed its own system of governance and enjoyed a distinct ecclesiastical identity, autonomy and prestige. Their particular Christian vision, tradition, socio-religious customs were sacred to these faithful, who considered it a right and duty to

⁸³ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 22.

⁸⁴ Placid Joseph Podipara, "Introduction to The Varthamanappusthakam," *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 190 (1971), 1-28 at 3-4.

⁸⁵ During the period of Latin governance (1599-1896), the regional and general yogams became extinct, because they were absolutely incompatible with the medieval concept of monarchic Episcopal power prevalent in West, that did not admit participation of the Christian faithful in the administration of the Church (cfr. Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 23).

⁸⁶ Andrews Thazhath, "The Superior and Ordinary Tribunals," 380.

uphold and maintain them to protect their distinct ecclesiastical identity. Consequently, when Portuguese efforts to abolish these existing practices threatened this very identity and autonomy⁸⁷, it was natural for the St. Thomas Christians to revolt.

Although the Church of St. Thomas Christians was hierarchically dependent on the Chaldean Church, for all intents and purposes it was autonomous and had developed an identity of its own. With the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries,⁸⁸ Indian Christians were initiated into the world of Latin or Western Christendom.⁸⁹ This relationship was initially cordial⁹⁰; however, this “new world did not only distort the identity, but shattered the unity and destroyed the autonomy of the Indian Church of St. Thomas.”⁹¹

The Latinizing and colonizing efforts that began in 1502 culminated in the Synod of Diamper. With one stroke, this synod enacted all measures the Portuguese had tried to impose on the St. Thomas Christians. Eastern and indigenous elements, which constituted the distinctive identity⁹² of this Church, were replaced with the law of Peter, the Latin rite, Latin language and Western culture. Severing the hierarchical relationship of the St. Thomas Christians with the Chaldean Church, a Latin hierarchy and Portuguese patronage were imposed and all Eastern indigenous elements suppressed. Thus, the Indian Church lost the identity and autonomy that it had striven to preserve and protect for more than 16 centuries.

The drastic changes introduced by the Synod of Diamper were perpetuated in the vigorously Latinizing policies of Latin bishops appointed by the Padroado. Although the synodal decrees were the norm for these prelates, they had grave repercussions for the life of the St. Thomas Christians. Under the Latin Padroado rule, the autonomy

⁸⁷ Mathias Mundadan in the second chapter of his book *Indian Christians' Search for Identity...* describes in detail the arrival of western Christians and the challenges they posed to the autonomy, identity and unity of Indian Christians.

⁸⁸ Though the Portuguese explorers landed on the Malabar Coast in 1498, it was only on Vasco-de-Gamas's second voyage to India in 1502 that the Christian community in Malabar came in closer contact with the fellow Christians of Portugal (cfr. Xavier Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India*, 81).

⁸⁹ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Indian Christians' Search for Identity*, 30.

⁹⁰ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Indian Christians' Search for Identity*, 30.

⁹¹ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Indian Christians' Search for Identity*, 30-31.

⁹² The law of Thomas, the eastern rite, the Syriac language and the Indian cultural elements constituted the distinctive identity of the Church; cfr. Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 70.

and identity of the St. Thomas Christians further declined with the degradation of the office of archdeacon and the suppression of all-India jurisdiction.

8.1. Degradation of the Office of the Archdeacon

As seen above, until the Synod of Diamper, the Indian Church had a single, undisputed leader in its archdeacon. Under his leadership, with indigenous structures like *yogams* having legislative and judicial powers, the Church was competent to make decisions concerning the community and to resolve internal conflicts and disputes without relying on any outside authority.

Despite suppressing many indigenous and Eastern elements of the Church, the Synod of Diamper did not explicitly suppress the office of archdeacon. However, under the Latin Jesuit Bishops of Padroado,⁹³ the traditional authority and position of this office slowly died out. Unlike the Chaldean bishops, the Latin bishops wanted to exercise all powers of governance by themselves. Unwilling to concede to the archdeacon the powers they had enjoyed for centuries, these bishops restricted his powers to those of a Latin vicar-general.⁹⁴ As Mathias Mundadan writes, "Under the Latin Portuguese rule, the archbishops were superiors and the archdeacons subordinates."⁹⁵ With the explicit intention of curtailing the archdeacon's authority, the Latin bishops used their power "to exclude the Archdeacon completely from Church governance, humiliated him before the Hindu kings, and curtailed all his powers, rights and prerogatives."⁹⁶ These actions led to frequent confrontations between the Latin bishops and indigenous archdeacons. Relations between archbishop and archdeacon reached their low rank under Archbishop Francis Garcia, who "looked upon the traditional practice of the Archdeacon exercising jurisdiction as an

⁹³ For more details about the rule of Jesuit Archbishops under *Padroado* see Joseph Thekkedath, *History of Christianity in India, vol. II: From the Middle of the Sixteenth Century to the End of the Seventeenth Century (1542-1700)* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1982) 75-90; Domenico Ferroli, *Jesuits in Malabar*, 2 vols. (1939 and 1951), Bangalore: Bangalore Press: King & Co; Jacob Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, 111-139.

⁹⁴ Varkey Vithayathil, *The Origin and Progress*, 23.

⁹⁵ A. Mathias Mundadan, *Indian Christians' Search for Identity*, 47.

⁹⁶ Paul Pallath, *The Grave Tragedy of the Church of St. Thomas Christians and the Apostolic Mission of Sebastiani* (Changanassery: HIRS Publications, 2006) 10.

abuse to be corrected."⁹⁷ This was one of the reasons that led to a split in this Church with the *Coonan Cross Oath*.

Since the archdeacon represented the Church of St. Thomas Christians, the degradation of his office resulted in the loss of the Church's status and prestige.⁹⁸ In India, the archdeacon 'was the visible foundation of the unity of the Thomas Christians'⁹⁹ and 'the symbol of their ecclesio-religious identity.'¹⁰⁰ His word was the last in settling conflicts and in matters affecting the society. Knowing well that eliminating the archdiaconate would diminish their community's status, the Indian clergy and the faithful resisted such moves with all their might.¹⁰¹ The Portuguese missionaries, however, had the political and ecclesiastical backing necessary to have their way. Without a unifying head to speak for and defend them, the community of St. Thomas helplessly witnessed the highhandedness of the Latin archbishops and Portuguese authorities. In *Varthamanappusthakam*, Thomas Paremakkal describes the pathetic situation of the Church of Malabar without a head from within the community:

The cause of this uneasiness and these divisions is nothing but the absence of a head from within the community... If a community possesses a head from within itself that community will grow and get strong. This is a truth clear to us and to all the communities, and it is also ordained by the natural law. Hence the nations of Europe, the Italians, the French, the English, the Portuguese and the others elect their civil and ecclesiastical heads from among themselves. Nay, even the Greeks, the Armenians, the Syrians and the other Christians who suffer under the servitude of the Turks, appoint their national and ecclesiastical heads from among themselves, and in this Malabar all except the *Pazhayakuttukar* (Syrians in communion with Rome), from the Brahmin down to Pulaya caste, have their leaders and religious heads from among themselves.

⁹⁷ Jacob Kollaparambil, *St. Thomas Christians' Revolution in 1653* (Kottayam: The Catholic Bishop's House, 1981) 105.

⁹⁸ Paul Pallath, *The Grave Tragedy*, 10.

⁹⁹ Paul Pallath, *The Grave Tragedy*, 10.

¹⁰⁰ Paul Pallath, *The Grave Tragedy*, 10.

¹⁰¹ Francis Peraparambil, "The tradition of the Roman Catholic Church on the Coonan Cross Oath," in Xavier Koodapuzha and John Panicker (eds.), *Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church: papers and joint statements 1989-2000* (Kottayam: Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, 2001) 622.

When something pertaining to these communities is at stake the heads of these communities before any one else come forward to their help.¹⁰²

Degradation of the office of the archdeacon and of the *Yogams* left the community without its own structures and a leader of its own to decide for itself. Regarding this phenomenon, J. Kollaparambil writes: "The gradual diminishing of the competence of archdeacon and finally the termination of this office under the Latin prelates was by no means, a progress in the Indian Church; on the contrary it was a regress. Because it was through the institute of the Arch-diaconate, that the Church of India kept her individuality and autonomy to a certain extent."¹⁰³ That is, without a common head, the Church of St. Thomas Christians had no possibility for self-rule. As a result, the community under Portuguese rule could not even think of autonomy - whether legislative, executive or judicial. The institute of the archdiaconate among the St. Thomas Catholics of India finally became extinct with the death of Archdeacon Mathew in 1706.¹⁰⁴

8.2. Suppression of All India Jurisdiction

Until the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth century, only the Church of St. Thomas Christians existed in India. Hence, there was no possibility for a territorial limitation of that Church.¹⁰⁵ Contrary to the notion that this Church was limited to the Malabar region, St. Thomas Christian communities existed in several other regions of India: Kalyan, Mylapore and Coromandel Coast, Ceylon, Goa, Mysore, Mangalore, Sind-Punjab, Patna, Thana near Bombay etc.¹⁰⁶ However, Muslim invasions and various other political, ecclesiastical and historical reasons, along with absorption into the

¹⁰² Thomas Paremakkal, *The Varthamanappusthakam*, 35.

¹⁰³ Jacob Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, 15.

¹⁰⁴ Jacob Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, 262.

¹⁰⁵ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 19; Paul Pallath, "Syro-Malabar Church: Juridical Status and Synodal Functioning," in Eluvathingal, Francis (ed.), *Syro-Malabar Church Since the Eastern Code: an Evaluation and Future Prospects Particular Laws, Statutes, Decrees, Bibliography* (Trichur: Marymatha Publications, 2003) 30-56 at 46.

¹⁰⁶ Abraham D. Mattam, *The Indian Church of St. Thomas and Her Missionary Enterprises before the Sixteenth Century*, Kottayam: OIRSI, 1975, 14-35; Abraham D. Mattam, *Forgotten East: Mission, Liturgy and Spirituality of the Eastern Churches* (Satna: Ephrem's Publications, 2001) 62-81; Xavier Kochuparampil, *Evangelization in India* (Kottayam: OIRSI 1993) 247-265.

Latin Church in some instances, led to the gradual extinction of many St. Thomas Christian communities outside the Malabar coast.¹⁰⁷ Based on this fact, A. D. Mattam proves that the Church was in fact an all-India Church.¹⁰⁸ For that reason, the metropolitan was titled the 'Metropolitan and door of all India'¹⁰⁹ and the archdeacon the 'Archdeacon of all India.'¹¹⁰ Even Mar Abraham, the last Chaldean metropolitan of the St. Thomas Christians, sometimes used the titles "Metropolitan of the ancient Christianity of St. Thomas in India" and "Metropolitan of all India."¹¹¹ This all-India jurisdiction was even approved by the supreme authority of the Church. Both *Divina disponente clementia*, the bull that confirmed the patriarchal election of Simon Sulaqa, and *Cum nos nuper* of 28 April 1553, with which Pope Julius III imposed the *pallium* on him, recognized his all-India jurisdiction.¹¹²

As with its autonomy and distinct identity, the Church of St. Thomas Christians lost the all-India jurisdiction it had enjoyed for sixteen centuries. This loss occurred through no fault of its members, but because of jurisdictional disputes between two bishops. It began with the 'grave mistake'¹¹³ of Francis Ros, the first Latin Archbishop of the St. Thomas Christians,¹¹⁴ who secured papal permission to move his archiepiscopal seat from Angamaly to Kodungallur.¹¹⁵ Ros argued that the archbishop could more safely exercise his duties in Kodungallur, a Portuguese fortress, than in Angamaly, the territory of a hostile Hindu

¹⁰⁷ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 19; Abraham D. Mattam, *Forgotten East.*, 79-81.

¹⁰⁸ Abraham D. Mattam, *Forgotten East*, 92.

¹⁰⁹ Placid Joseph Podipara, *The Hierarchy of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 32 ; Edouard René Hambye, "Medieval Christianity in India: the Eastern Church," in Hormice C. Perumalil & Edouard René Hambye, *Christianity in India* (Alleppey: Prakasam Publications, 1972) 3.

¹¹⁰ For the titles of Archdeacons with their Syriac original indicative of their authority all over India, see Jacob Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All India...*, 223-226.

¹¹¹ Giuseppe Beltrami, *La Chiesa Chaldea nel secolo dell'Unione*, Roma: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1933, 194; Jacob Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All India...*, 225.

¹¹² Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 16-17.

¹¹³ The expression "grave mistake" used by Stephen Neill in this context speaks volumes about the damage this move from the part of Francis Ros caused to the Church of St. Thomas Christians.

¹¹⁴ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India, The Beginnings to AD 1707*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 310.

¹¹⁵ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, 311.

ruler.¹¹⁶ The overlapping jurisdictions that resulted led to violent jurisdictional conflicts between Ros and the choleric and extremely resolute bishop of Cochin, Andrew of Sancta Maria.¹¹⁷ To resolve the conflict, the pope issued the apostolic letters *Cum sicut* and *Cum nobis*, by which he instructed Alexis de Menezes, the metropolitan archbishop of Goa, to set definite limits and boundaries for the archdioceses of Angamaly.¹¹⁸ In accordance with the decree *Omnibus notum* of 22 December 1610, Menezes decided the territorial boundaries of the dioceses of Angamaly with respect to the dioceses of Cochin and Mylapore.¹¹⁹ His decision was approved and confirmed by Pope Paul V with the apostolic letter *Alias postquam*, dated 6 February 1616.¹²⁰ The pope's letter, which finalized the loss of all-India jurisdiction for the St. Thomas Christians, limited this Church's territory to a small section of Malabar and some parts of Mysore, Madura and Karnataka.¹²¹ The territorial restriction also led to the division of St. Thomas Christians between the two Latin dioceses of Angamaly and Cochin under the Portuguese Padroado. The vast majority of them were in the archdiocese of Angamaly.¹²²

The Syro-Malabar Church is yet to recover from the effects of that decision. Although its historical development and growth has resulted in its elevation to major-archiepiscopal status, the all-India jurisdiction lost in the beginning of the 17th century has not yet been restored fully. The question whether the erection of the eparchy of Shamshabad for territories in India where there exists no Syro-Malabar eparchy, has restored the all-India jurisdiction of this Church still remains a matter of ongoing conflict and confusion.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to study the indigenous structures of the Church of St Thomas Christians (Syro-Malabar Church). These structures developed from this Church's inception in the first century until the foreign missionaries arrived in the sixteenth. During that time, this Church founded by St. Thomas the Apostle enjoyed autonomy and possessed its own indigenous systems of administration. Although this Church became hierarchically dependent on the Persian Church in the fourth century, the

¹¹⁶ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, 311.

¹¹⁷ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, 311-312.

¹¹⁸ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 90-93.

¹¹⁹ The apostolic letters "Cum sicut" and "Cum nobis" in *Bullarium Patronatus Portugalliae*, tom. 2, pp. 12-13 & 14-15 respectively.

¹²⁰ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 91-92.

¹²¹ Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 93.

¹²² Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 93.

Church of St. Thomas Christians remained fundamentally autonomous. Under the leadership of its indigenous archdeacon, assisted by *Yogams*, the Church governed itself with legislative, executive and judicial power. The patriarch of the Persian Church exercised authority over the St. Thomas Christians only in appointing and consecrating their metropolitan, and this Chaldean metropolitan never utilized any authority other than the exercise of Episcopal orders.

The Portuguese missionaries, arriving in India in the 16th century, succeeded in imposing Latin rule, bishops and practices and Portuguese patronage on the native Christians, thereby suppressing all Eastern and indigenous aspects of their patrimony. This imposition and suppression became law at the Synod of Diamper, which resulted in the complete loss of the distinct ecclesiastical identity and autonomy of the St. Thomas Christians. Under Latin rule, the traditionally powerful and prestigious office of archdeacon was gradually degraded until it became extinct. The same phenomenon plagued the *yogams* as well. With the loss of these traditional structures, Indian Christians successively lost all potential for autonomy and the Syro-Malabar Church was *de facto* reduced to a suffragan diocese of a Latin diocese in India.

After the Coonan Cross Oath, Propaganda established new hierarchical structures and appointed Carmelite missionaries to govern them. These actions, including the consecration of a native bishop, initially appeared favourable to the St. Thomas Christians. However, as the Padroado bishops had done before them, the Carmelites strove to retain their mission entrusted and therefore to deny the Syro-Malabarians bishops of their own rite and nation. Finally, in 1887, a major step towards restoring the lost autonomy of the Syro-Malabar Church was taken. The Holy See separated the Syro-Malabar Church from the Latin Church and entrusted it to non-Carmelite Latin bishops. Nine years later, the two vicariates were reorganized into three and entrusted to three native bishops. With the beginning of the indigenous rule, the Syro-Malabar Church began the slow process of recovering its lost autonomy and identity. It subsequently matured through various stages of growth, such as the establishment of Syro-Malabar hierarchy, erection of a second ecclesiastical province and many dioceses, extension of territory, erection of eparchies outside the proper territory etc., culminating in its elevation to major archiepiscopal status and its governance under a common head. It is true that the indigenous structures have not been fully restored but the autonomy and vibrant identity represented by them find their rightful place in the present set-up.