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## CHURCH OF ST. THOMAS IN INDIA

### Its History, Problems and Hopes

"Among all the nations of earth there is but one People of God, which takes its citizens from every race, making them citizens of a kingdom which is of a heavenly and not of an earthly nature" (*L. G. No. 13*). The universality of the Church is not purely extensive seeking to spread itself to all peoples, but also intensive "striving energetically and constantly to bring all humanity with all its riches back to Christ its Head in the unity of His Spirit. In virtue of this catholicity each individual part of the Church contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church" (*Ibid*). Hence the history, the unique heritage and tradition of the Church of St. Thomas tracing its origin to the preaching of the Apostle of Christ, with its own problems and hopes has a unique contribution to make to the unity and universality of the Church. So we present below a short description of the history, heritage, present situation, problems and hopes of the Malabar Church of St. Thomas the Apostle.

#### 1. History

That St. Thomas, one of the disciples of Christ preached the Gospel in India and sealed the faith he communicated with his own blood in martyrdom is not only the unbroken tradition of the St. Thomas Christians in India but also generally witnessed to by the Fathers of the Universal Church as well as by the early liturgies. These Fathers of the Church bearing witness to the Indian apostolate of St. Thomas belong to such different parts of the world like St. Ephrem in Syria, St. Jerome in Jerusalem, St. Gregory Nazianzen in Asia Minor, St. Ambrose in Milan and St. Gregory of Tours in France, that we can take it as a fact acknowledged by the universal Church already in the early centuries of Christianity.

What makes the preaching of St. Thomas in India particularly significant is that his proclamation of God's Word did not have to confront the

various challenges external to the Word like other Apostles in other places. St. Paul had to fight the Judaisers on the one hand and the highly developed philosophical ideas of the Greeks on the other. Against the Jews he had to show how Christ's salvific work marked a complete break with the legalistic approach of Judaic religion while against the Greeks he had to show that the Cross of Christ which was foolishness for them was God's wisdom, and that the crucified Christ was at the same time the image of the invisible God and creator even of angels. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews had to face the nostalgia of Jewish Christians for the solemn ceremonies of the Jerusalem temple, while both John and Paul had to speak in the language of the Greeks adopting to a great extent their sophisticated categories. This certainly gave a Greek slant to their preaching and at a later stage when the Apologetes tried to make a more extensive use of Greek philosophy, there arose great many ambiguities that spawned the heresies of the third, fourth and fifth centuries.

In India St. Thomas did not have any such special challenges to meet. First approaching the Jewish community of the Diaspora he could easily move from the promises of the Old Testament to their fulfilment in Jesus of Nazareth. Far away from Jerusalem for generations they had no experience of the solemn ritual of the Jerusalem temple. But as in the Jewish diaspora elsewhere the only obstacle he would encounter in them would be a jealous attachment to tradition even in its least details and a firm refusal to accept a new Covenant in the place of the old. Even in the non-Jewish communities there were no elaborate and sophisticated philosophical systems to contend with. The six systems of Hindu philosophy had not yet evolved. Even Buddhism would develop its complicated polemical system only centuries later. The Upanishadic schools under the leadership of different masters did not present any unified systematic stand on religious truths. So the preaching of St. Thomas would be a simple heralding of the divine revelation which God promulgated in history through words and deeds of Jesus for human salvation. Christian confession in such a context was an undistorted hearing of God's Word, the conscious and methodical explanation and explication of the divine revelation received and grasped in faith. It was essentially missionary and prophetic, and practical in its pastoral application to the daily life of the people without any theoretical elaboration through philosophical systems. It was more of an evangelization of experience and presence than of systematic and extensive expansion.

## 2. Indian Tradition

This is the impression gained about the apostolic preaching of St. Thomas from the legendary accounts handed down through generations in Kerala tradition. A poetic narration ascribed to Rabban Thomas Maliekal of Niranam describes how Apostle Thomas took a boat from Arabia in the company of Habban a certain emissary of Chozan Perumal, landed at Malienkara in 50 A.D. January, established the faith there in eight days of preaching. Fifty Jews and three thousand natives embraced the faith and were baptized in the period of an year and a half. He established there a Cross and a place of worship, appointed ministers instructing them publicly in the faith and ordained Kephass the nephew of King Andrew as Bishop. Then he moved on to a place called Chandrapura and of the two local leaders named Peter and Paul he consecrated Paul Bishop. The well known apocryphal work of the 2nd or 3rd century, *Acts of Thomas*, describes in detail the style of preaching of the Apostle: Coming as a competent artisan from abroad he promised to build a palace for the king, but distributed the money received from the king among the poor. When the king inquired of his friends how the construction of his palace was progressing they reported: "He has not built any palace or done anything about it. He goes about in the towns and villages distributes alms to the poor, teaches them about a new God, heals the sick, casts out devils and does many similar things. We think he is a magician. But his compassion for the poor, healing of the sick without receiving any remuneration, his life of penance and devotion make us think that he is either a magician or a new messenger of God. He fasts and prays at great length, lives on salted bread, drinks only water, has only one dress, and does not receive anything from any one for his own use and gives all that he has to others." The king who was angry because he felt that he had been cheated by the foreigner is softened and reassured in a dream by his deceased brother who described to him the beauty of the palace the Apostle built for the king in heaven. This legendary story of the Apostle's alms-giving became a classical example for Syrian writers in their eulogy of alms-giving. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Doctrine of the Apostles) a work of the 4th century places the emphasis on the organizational establishment of the Church: India and all its countries and those bordering out even to the farthest sea, received the Apostle's hand of Priesthood from Judas Thomas who was guide and ruler in the church which he built there and ministered there." Proclaiming God's saving Word and establishing the priesthood for the ministry of the Word indicated the basic programme of evangelization adopted by Thomas.

### 3. Testimony of the Fathers

This simple preaching of the Word of God is what impressed most the Fathers of the Church in the Indian apostolate of Thomas. St. Gregory Naziansen writing around 380 A.D. against the Arian heretics who gloried in their superior culture, nobility of birth and sophisticated philosophy, says that even philosophically more important in his view was what all men everywhere had in common: the same heaven, the course of the sun and the moon the same for all, rain, fruits, the vital force of the air, rivers, the common reason, law, prophets and the crucifixion of Christ that restored all without exception. The apostles were the witnesses of this common humanity since they were pilgrims in many countries in order that the Gospel might be preached everywhere, no one may be deprived of the light of the Triune God, and that even those who were in darkness and in the shadow of death may be freed from the darkness of ignorance. This was the scope of their preaching. "What had Paul in common with the gentiles" asks Gregory: "Luke with Achaia, Andrew with Epirus, John with Ephesus, Thomas with India, Mark with Italy?" They all had only one common fatherland, the Jerusalem above. For all there is only one race, if you look below, the dust, and if you look above, that divine breath of which we are made partakers. What was significant with the apostolic preaching of Thomas was that he preached this common humanity of all men and their salvation in Jesus Christ in the remote India which he adopted as his own country (see *Oratio* 33 PG 36 col. 227-30).

St. Ambrose sees in the Indian apostolate of Thomas a sign of the providential establishment of universal peace. Commenting on Psalm 45, 10 (46,9): "He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth, he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the chariots with fire," Ambrose says that with the establishment of the Roman empire wars both internal and external ceased to such an extent that the Lord could send the apostles throughout the whole world saying: Going teach ye all nations (Mt. 28,19). To them even kingdoms enclosed by barbaric mountains opened up as India for Thomas and Persia to Mathew. Thus using the temporal peace achieved by Rome, the Church was able to spread itself to the whole world, pacify the minds of people everywhere so that all peoples were able to confess eloquently the omnipotent rule of the one God. The lesson he draws from it is that Christian faith makes us pass over the world in order to be above the world (PL. 14, col. 1198-99). Similarly St. Isidore in his work *De Ortu et Obitu Patrum* describes how Thomas

named Didymus, a look-alike of the Saviour, an apostle unbelieving by hearing but believer by sight preached the Gospel to the Parthians, Medes, Persians, Hyrcans and to the Indians holding the Eastern regions, penetrating to the inmost areas of the nations (PL. 83, col. 152).

#### 4. The Indian Originality

In every place the apostolic preaching acknowledged and accepted whatever was noble and unique in the religious tradition of the people. In Palestine it emphasised the new Covenant established by the death and resurrection of Christ in fulfilment of God's law and eschatological promise. Against the background of the mystic cults and saviour gods of the Greek world the apostolic preaching stressed the one real mystery of human salvation hidden in God's plan before the beginning of time and revealed in the fullness of time in the one true mediator between God and man. What was unique in the Indian religious context was according to the testimony of the early Fathers of the Church the deep religious experience of both the Brahmanas and Śramanas and the institution of monasticism common to all Indian religions especially Buddhism and Jainism.

In this respect the testimony of St. Gregory of Tours about St. Thomas is particularly revealing. In his *Books of Miracles* Ch. 32 he narrates a report given by a certain Theodorus who visited the tomb of St. Thomas in India: "Thomas the Apostle according to the history of his passion is declared to have suffered in India, and his body after a long time was taken and transferred to a city which the Syrians called Edessa and buried there. But in the place in India where he rested previously there is a monastery and a temple of wonderful magnitude diligently constructed and decorated" (PL. 71, col. 733). This is clearly long before Christian monasticism started in the Western centres of Christendom. Though the early Christians were models of intense piety and especially the Syrian Christians considered baptism itself an entry into covenanted life, the institution of a select group designated as monks and nuns emerged only after the fourth century.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand in India Buddhist viharas or monasteries were a common sight and the new Christians could easily emulate the Buddhists and found their own monasteries. In fact the term 'palli' used to designate a church in Kerala was borrowed from the

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1. Cf. Robert Murray, *Symbol of Church and Kingdom, A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*. (Cambridge University Press, 1975) p. 14.

Buddhists who called their monasteries by that title. It is generally recognized that Christian religious life both in its anchoritic and monastic forms received inspiration from the Indian religions, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. It is natural to believe that Christian monasticism first started in the Indian Church at the very birth place of monasticism and was later adopted by the Mesopotamian and Egyptian Christians who were in close contact with India. In the Indian Church itself monasticism died out owing to the vicissitudes of history, especially the onslaught of Islam which wiped out Buddhist monasteries as well.

The miracle St. Gregory describes in connection with St. Thomas' original burial place in India is also significant: A lamp placed in front of the place where the Apostle was buried shines day and night perpetually without being nourished by oil or anything else, simply by divine power. It is not extinguished by wind, nor is it accidentally put out. It does not diminish by burning but grows by the Apostle's power, which is unknown to man, yet known to the power of God. (Ibid) It is difficult to judge whether such a miraculous phenomenon was a fact or a mere allegory used by Theodorus. But its meaning and symbolism is particularly significant in the Indian context. Against the Buddhist idea of liberation as an illumination modelled on Buddha's enlightenment and the Hindu insistence on the Divine Reality as light by which the sun and the moon and all sources of light shine, the faith preached by the Apostle appears as a never failing lamp nourished not by human endeavour and achievement but solely by divine power through the intercessory power of St. Thomas. This Indian Church of St. Thomas geographically far removed from the main body of Christians can be taken as a typical example of the place and role of an individual church in the universal Church. That the St. Thomas Christians maintained their apostolic faith intact down through the long centuries inspite of the vicissitudes of history is an added reason why her experience can be taken as normative in our contemporary discussions on ecclesiology.

Though the Apostles communicated primarily the news of the salvation accomplished by Christ for all men, what they handed on included "everything which contributes to the holiness of life and increase of faith of the people of God" (DV n. 8). In communicating to their hearers what Jesus had said and done, the Apostles were guided by "that clearer understanding which they enjoyed after they had been instructed by the events of Christ's risen life and taught by the light of the spirit of truth." But in

this the individual Apostles could not go by their personal preferences since they were not above the Word of God but could teach only what they received. So they preached in such a way that they told the honest truth about Jesus and preserved the form of proclamation of the Word. Still there was abundant scope for diversity since from the wealth of material available they had to explicate somethings "in view of the situation of their individual churches" (*D.V.* n. 19).

## **5. Originality in Church Administration**

One of the original features of the Indian Church was the form of church administration which it accepted from the millenia old democratic tradition of India. The villages were ruled by "panchayaths" a body of five selected from the heads of the families who constituted the "karayogam" or village assembly. Parallel to this the Churches were governed by the "pallyogam." The bishop was the Spiritual Father of the people, wholly occupied with the Word of God and least involved in the organizational aspects of the Church and not at all in the temporal administration. He was the spiritual leader very much like a Guru or the Acharaya of a Hindu mutt or the head of a Buddhist vihara. The head of the ecclesiastical administrative bodies like the "pallyogam" and person immediately responsible for the unity and continuity of administration was the Archdeacon. Though sometimes there were several bishops in the Church there was only one archdeacon and he was called "The Archdeacon of All India." The task of organizing the people, appointing pastors of Churches and the like belonged to the Archdeacon. This local autonomy guaranteed the Indian identity of the Church of St. Thomas and the continuity of tradition even when Bishops were received from the Church of Chaldea.

## **6. Chaldean Influence**

When did the Indian Church of St. Thomas come under the rule of Chaldean bishops is difficult to determine. Definitely it was after the age of the Patristic witnesses mentioned above since none of them alludes to such a relationship. Much has been made of the introduction of the Chaldean liturgy into the Church of St. Thomas as an imposition on the Indian Church from the outside. Something that has to be borne in mind in examining the question is that though the proclamation of the Gospel was done mostly in and through the liturgy, its formal aspect did not play a dominant role in the primitive Church. As A. Baumstark states, it would

be naive to imagine that Christ and the Apostles fixed the details of liturgical prayers and ceremonies. Christianity did not break with Judaism on the details of worship. In fact Christians continued to use the Jewish form of worship giving it, however, an interpretation centred in Christ, especially the Breaking of Bread which came to occupy the central place as the Lord's Eucharist. In addition to the Davidic psalms and other traditional prayers the Christian Eucharistic prayer was mostly formulated ex-tempore by the celebrant. As historical documents clearly show only by the turn of the 5th century owing to the clear danger of heresies creeping into liturgical prayers did the major Churches of Christendom, Carthage in Africa, Lyons in France, Jerusalem and Rome itself legislate that prayers used in public worship should have the prior approval of competent authorities. Only from that time did definite forms gain fixity in particular Churches. In Churches far removed from the centres of Christendom as that of the St. Thomas Christians in India the fluidity and ambiguity in liturgical prayers except for a general order of the sequence of ideas and rites, should have naturally lasted much longer.

But when in the Indian Church the line of bishops died out, and Chaldean bishops from the neighbouring Church of Persia took up the leadership of the Church, the foreign bishops naturally brought with them the well defined anaphora of Addai and Mari, the founders of their Church. This anaphora titled as that of "the Apostles" (i.e. Addai and Mari), one of the earliest eucharistic prayers, had such an original simplicity and naturality that the transition from the spontaneity of the early practice to the new order could barely have been noticed by the people. Even then complete uniformity was never achieved. In Churches in which the majority of people lived in villages governed by people guided more by practical wisdom than by juridical idealism a variety of liturgical forms were in use even in the same anaphora. In 1599 the synod of Diamper under Archbishop Menesis of Goa took a form of the anaphora of Addai and Mari and made the minimum alteration in it to "correct" theological ambiguities. But when Rome wanted to print it in 1757 it was pointed out that the form in use in Malabar was different from the one presented by Dom Menesis. So the one in use, which was fixed by Archbishop Roz in 1610 was printed in Rome in 1774. It conformed faithfully to the order of the anaphora as found in its earliest known form, the Mar Esaya text. But when a special committee in Rome in 1955 restored the Mass dropping all Latin borrowings, it brought in yet another order of the same anaphora.



What is clearly evident is that the introduction of the Chaldean liturgy and its various forms did in no way seriously affect the apostolic experience of the St. Thomas Christians: The unity and continuity of the tradition was under the care of "the Archdeacon of All India." Such was the apostolic Church of St. Thomas simple in its Christian faith received from the Apostles, genuinely Indian in its culture, with its worship expressed in the East Syrian tradition, a people harmonized and united in its living witness to Christ.

## 7. Latin Period

What really affected the apostolic experience and historical continuity of the St. Thomas Christians was the introduction of Latin rule at the turn of the 17th century. Latin bishops who came in with support of the Western colonial powers were neither benign nor tolerant of the Indian identity as the Chaldean bishops were. They ignored the value of Oriental tradition and the authentic experience of the people of God and their active leadership in witnessing to the Gospel, and imposed on the St. Thomas Christians the pyramidal administrative structure of the Western Church. Even the Archdeacon was deprived of his powers and eventually his office itself was abolished and all powers concentrated in the hands of the bishop, who was guided in all vital decisions by the juridical tradition of the Roman Church. This fusing of spiritual leadership with organisational and temporal administration and the concentration of power in one individual's hands naturally led to tensions and conflicts. As the *Varthamanapustakam* of Paremmackal Thomakathanar of the 18th century states (p. 499) till the imposition of the Latin rule the Christians of St. Thomas through all the vicissitudes of history remained one; but with the overefficient administration of the Latins they split up into various Churches, groups and factions!

From time immemorial the St. Thomas Christians maintained a certain political and social autonomy of their own. Thanks to the royal grants from the Perumals, the rulers of Kerala, the Thomas Christians of Cranganore and Quilon enjoyed civil and juridical autonomy. After the break up of the Chera kingdom the Christians had their own kings of Villarvattam, and when the dynasty became extinct at the end of the 15th century they came to be under the protection of the king of Diamper. In 1565 the kingdom of Diamper was annexed to Cochin and king of Cochin became the protector of Christians. In 1576 the king of Cochin writes to Pope Gregory XIII about "the Christians of

the name of St. Thomas and many others" who are his subjects. Three years later he writes again to the Pope requesting protection for the Chaldean archbishop from the Portuguese as well as certain indulgences requested by the Archdeacon. An anonymous letter written at about the same date describes how the Christians were governed by the (Chaldean) Archbishop of Angamaly and the Archdeacon, who alone could influence the Christians in favour of the Portuguese. Since the St. Thomas Christians were dispersed in several kingdoms and principalities of Kerala, they had the independence and autonomy of a Christian republic united under the rule of their Metropolitan who was the spiritual head and the Archdeacon who was in actual control of administration, and the two of them had exclusive competence over all civil and some criminal cases involving the St. Thomas Christians.

In fact when the Portuguese first arrived in India at the close of the 15th century they were enthusiastically welcomed by the St. Thomas Christians as harbingers of great things for the Indian Church. For the Christians were vividly conscious of their precarious situation under the rule of the Hindu kings and particularly the threat from the Muslims whose invasion of India a few centuries earlier had driven the Christians to the Malabar coast from the rest of India, as Archbishop Roz testifies in one of his letters. But subsequently the mercantile and political interests of the Portuguese shattered the hopes of the Indian Christians and soured their relationship with their Western Christian brethren. The aggressive methods of the colonial powers and their attempts at forced conversions actually closed the doors to real mission work. Christian presence came to be restricted to some extent to a few pockets on the coastal areas. The main outcome of the Portuguese mission work was the establishment of the Latin Church in India. In 1534 the diocese of Goa was established for the Latin Catholics as a suffragan see of the archdiocese of Funchal in the Portuguese island of Medeira. The diocese of Quilon existed from 1329 long before the coming of the Portuguese and was constituted as a suffraganate of Sultaniae in Persia. In 1558 the Latin hierarchy of India was established under the Portuguese protection with Goa as the archbishopric and Cochin as suffraganate. After having recognized the Catholic orthodoxy of the St. Thomas Christians for over a century, the archbishop of Goa on his own convened in 1599 a synod at Diamper, made several allegations of heresy against them. Invoking the padroado rights of the King of Portugal over all his conquests, after repeated attempts, the Portuguese obtained from the Pope the brief "In supremo militantis" on August

4, 1600 granting patronage to the king of Portugal over the Malabar Church. Cranganore was made a suffraganate of Goa and Dom Francis Ros S. J. was made the bishop. Owing to strong protests invoking the ancient rights of the see of Cranganore it was restored to the metropolitan status in 1608. But in 1610 India was territorially divided among the padroado prelates of Goa, Cochin, Cranganore and Mylapore and the archbishop of Goa was declared the Primate of the East. Thus the Latin Christians came to be under the well organized colonial rule of the Portuguese and the Oriental Thomas Christians came under the Latin rule.

Soon tensions increased. When the Portuguese Latin archbishop Dom Garcia of Cranganore tried to suppress the traditional rights of the Archdeacon of the St. Thomas Christians and to cut them completely away from their Chaldean tradition denying an Armenian bishop Athalla entry into Malabar, a good section of the St. Thomas Christian under the leadership of Archdeacon Thomas made an oath at the Coonan Cross at Mattancherry on January 3, 1653 that they would never more be subject to the Portuguese Archbishop and the Jesuits. In 1661 the Holy See sent Bishop Sebastiani, a Carmelite to reconcile the two sides. Unfortunatley all attempts to bring the archdeacon in submission failed. So on February 1, 1663 Alexander Parambil, a cousin of the archdeacon Thomas was consecrated bishop for the St. Thomas Christians. But a section of those who rebelled with the archdeacon stuck to their position and consecrated Thomas the archdeacon bishop through the imposition of hands of twelve priests and formed their own Church, which later came to be under the Jacobite patriarch of Antioch, and further split into several factions. Consecration of Alexander Parambil as bishop was one of several attempts made by the Holy See to restore the autonomy of the St. Thomas Christians. But after his death in 1687 the rule again passed over to the Latin prelates. In the 18th century Mar Joseph Cariattil was consecrated archbishop of Cranganore under the padroado rule. But on his way to Malabar to take possession of his see he met with an untimely death at Goa on September 10, 1786.

## **8. Modern Period**

The Christians of St. Thomas had to fight for their independence from the foreign rule for well nigh three hundred years. The first step for this liberation came on May 20, 1887 when the two vicariates apostolic of Trichur and Kottayam were erected for them, withdrawing them from

the Latin jurisdiction of Verapoly. Perhaps this was part of a total plan for the liberation of the Indian Church the Holy see had conceived and hence a sequel to the reorganization of the Latin hierarchy of India with seven provinces giving Goa the primatial see patriarchal title on September 1, 1886. In 1896 the number of vicariates apostolic for St. Thomas Christians was increased to three and national bishops were appointed for them. On December 22, 1923 the hierarchy of the Syro-Malabar church was established with Ernakulam as archbishopric, and Trichur, Kottayam and Changanacherry as suffraganates. In 1954 the jurisdiction of the Malabarians was extended to Cape Comorin in the south and in the north into Malabar establishing the new diocese of Tellicherry. Changanacherry was raised to an archbishopric with the newly erected diocese of Palai as suffragan. Starting in 1962 new territories were assigned to the Malabar Church as exarchates, Chanda in 1962, Sagar, Ujjain and Satna in 1968, Jagdalpur and Bijnor in 1972. In 1977 these exarchates were raised to eparchies adding to them the newly erected diocese of Rajkot. The Syro-Malabar eparchy of Gorakhpur was added in 1983. Still the whole of India is divided into Latin dioceses, and the Church of St. Thomas remains an anomaly, just an exception. This is in short the sad history of a living individual Church that was ruled and fragmented by the Western colonial powers for centuries, still struggling for its original rights and identity.