



SOUTH INDIAN HISTORY CONGRESS

Proceedings of the South Indian History Congress

Journal of the South Indian History Congress since 1981

ISSN No.:2229-3671

UGC CARE Listed Journal

THE CATHOLICS IN KERALA: AN OVERVIEW

Author(s): Dr. Regi. S

Source: Proceedings of the South Indian History Congress 41(2023)

Stable Url: http://journal.southindianhistorycongress.org/show_articles.php?atl_id=MzA3

Published By: South Indian History Congress

© 2023 South Indian History Congress. All rights reserved.



THE CATHOLICS IN KERALA: AN OVERVIEW

Dr. Regi. S

Assistant Professor and Head, Research Centre of History
Holy Cross College
Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu.

Christianity is the third-largest practiced religion in Kerala, accounting for 18.38% of the population according to the 2021 census of India. The total Christian population was 6,141,269.¹ Although a minority, the Christian population of Kerala is proportionally much larger than that of India as a whole. A significant portion of the Indian Christian population resides in the state. There are two views prevailed among the historians about the origin of Christianity in Kerala. As per Apostolic traditions, the origin of Christianity was related to the arrival of Saint Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity, at the ancient seaport Muziris on the Kerala coast in 52 CE. The other tradition supports the Syrian immigration by the Christian traders from East Syria and Persia.²

The Apostolic origin of Christianity is chiefly based on the “Acts of Apostle Thomas”.³ According to it, St. Thomas came to India in 52 CE and landed near Cranganore. He had founded Churches in Cranganore, Palayur and Quilon. Then he moved to the Coromandel Coast suffered martyrdom in Little Mount near Chennai and was buried in Mylapore.⁴ The reports of Theophilus of Maldives, who was sent to India in 354 CE by Emperor Constantine and Theodore, who visited India in the sixth century CE were the proof for the existence of Christianity in India since the first century CE. A number of third and fourth century Roman writers including Ambrose of Milan and Gregory of Nazianzus also mention Thomas' trip to India, while Eusebius of Caesarea records

that his teacher Pantaenus visited a Christian community in India in the second century. Further, according to Eusebius of Caesarea and St. Jerome, St. Bartholomew, another apostle of Jesus Christ, also came to India. But there is no living tradition to support this view.⁵

In 345 CE, Thomas of Cana and a group of Chaldean Christians including a bishop, priests and deacons from Jerusalem, Bagdad and Nineveh or Mosul came to Malabar Coast and settled there. Until then Syrian priests used to come and govern the diocese of Malabar. However, there was a schism developed between the Christians as northists and southists. The off-springs who had settled northern bank of the river called themselves as northists and on the southern bank called themselves as southists. Both of them claimed that they are the legal heirs of Thomas of Cana.⁶ The southists who were an endogamous people and fairer in complexion labeled the other as Negroes and these discriminations and superiority led to quarrels and disputes.⁷

The Indian Church was influenced both by the Eastern and Western Churches during the medieval period. The development of the medieval Indian Christian community had happened under the influence of the Eastern Church headed by the Catholics or the Patriarch of the East. The Church of India presumably the Church of Kerala obtained its first Metropolitan See in the seventh or eighth century.⁸ Further it is interesting to note that during the eighth and ninth centuries there were two occasions of migration of Christians from Iran or Iraq to Kerala. The first group reached Kerala in about 774 CE under the leadership of Bishop Thomas and the second group reached Kerala in 813 CE under the leadership of the Bishops Proth and Sabor.⁹ Bishop Jacob was the Metropolitan of India in 1301 under Catholicos Yahbaliaha III (1281-1317 CE). This is proved by the Syriac manuscript that was written in Kerala during the medieval period and preserved till now.¹⁰

The Metropolitan had authority in both temporal and spiritual matters. He was appointed by the Catholicos and so he had to send the taxes and the gifts to the Catholicos' house. The Archdeacon was a local priest who has considerable influence in the community. As they administered the Church properties, they were considered as the secular superiors of the Christians.¹¹ Though vernacular was not used in liturgy, participation of the faithful in the liturgy was highly remarkable. They were hardworking farmers and some of them were merchants. A good many of them had a military tradition. They kept good relations with the local rulers and enjoyed high social position. Even then, until the end of fifteenth century, the Catholic Church in India was in its infancy.¹²

There are two opinions regarding the origin of Latin Catholic Church in Kerala. Some historians like L. M. Pylee were of the opinion that the Latin Catholic Church of Kerala was established by the Portuguese missionaries.¹³ However, according to Joannes De Maringoly, the Papal Legate who visited Malabar in 1348, there was a Latin Church at Quilon. It could be assumed that the Latinisation of the St. Thomas Christians could have been happened.¹⁴ But Fr. Placid had the opinion that the Latin Catholic Christians who were in the Malabar in the fourteenth century became extinct before the arrival of the Portuguese.¹⁵ Obviously the Portuguese missionaries were considered and accepted as the pioneers in bring the Latin rite into India presumably to Kerala.¹⁶

Two missionaries John of Monte Corvino, a Franciscan and Nicolas of Pistoia, a Dominican landed at Mylapore in 1291 AD on their way to China. On seeing the prosperous environment there they wanted to establish their missionary work there. But due to circumstances they could not do any missionary work at that time.¹⁷ The first ever Latin Bishop in India was Jordan Catalini of Severac. He came to India in 1321 with four Franciscan missionaries and did his missionary work until 1336, when he was stoned to death at Thane. Jordan was appointed as the first Bishop of Quilon by Pope John XXII before his death. State

Archives. In 1348, John De Maringoli, the Papal Legate arrived at Quilon, and spent sixteen months there.¹⁸

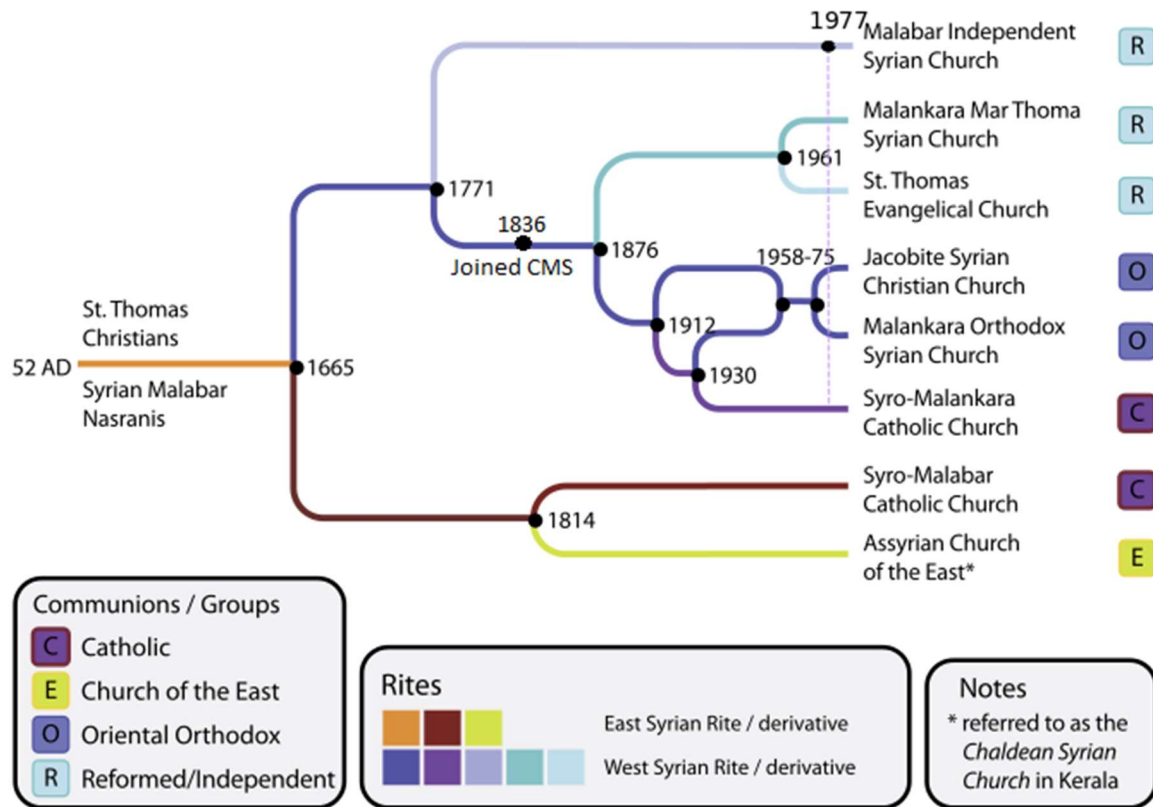
The Christian community in India underwent drastic changes under the influence of the Portuguese. Missionary works were continued hand in hand along with other business activities. Between 1535 and 1537, a group of Paravars from Travancore and Tuticorin fishery coast were converted to Christianity seeking protection against the Dutch and the Muslim traders. They were followed by a group of Mukkuvars in 1544. In recognition of these missionary activities the Holy See issued a Padroado or Patronage to Portugal. In 1514, Pope Leo X placed the already existing churches and communities and the new churches and communities to be established under the patronage of the King of Portugal by his Papal Bull. Under the Portuguese Padroado, the Latin Catholic Church in Kerala had a tremendous growth. Cochin became the second diocese of the Latin Catholic Church in India.¹⁹

In the meantime, in 1542, St. Francis Xavier came to India and did his missionary activities in the coastal regions of Kerala and Southern Tamil Nadu. Robert De Nobili who was in charge of the Madurai Mission carried out his missionary work in the Madurai region.²⁰ At this juncture, the Syrian community in Kerala underwent a drastic change under the Portuguese influence. Initially they had cordial relations hopeful of mutual benefits. But sooner their relation became stained and they had mutual fight. As the Portuguese became the political masters, they showed a superiority attitude towards the Syrians, whereas the Thomas Christians on the other hand very proud that they were following the superior practices.²¹

To narrow down the gap between the Latin Christians and the Syrian Christians, a Synod was organised in the Church of Diamper or Udayamperur. However, instead of narrow down the gap, the Synod widened the gap and

resulted in aggravating the problems. The Synod prohibited the Hindu customs and ceremonies that were followed during marriages and the entertaining of Hindu musicians during the Holy Mass. Further, it made the Latin or Portuguese Jesuits as superiors and the Archdeacons as inferior. Therefore an open outbreak was inevitable.²² This took a vigorous face in 1652 when Ahatallah, a Syrian Catholic, was deported to Goa. Therefore, the Syrian Christians took a oath on the “Coonan Cross” at Cochin in 1653 and vowed that they would never be under the control of the Jesuits. In 1662, when the Dutch defeated Portuguese and occupied Cochin, some of the Syrian Catholics switched to Jacobitism and they were called as “Puthenkuttukar”.²³

Besides, St. Joseph’s Pontifical Seminary, Alwaye was also source for the dispute. It has been a bone of contention between the Syrians and the Latins from its inception. In 1764, it was decided to start a seminary common to the Syrian and the Latin clergies. In 1776, it started to function for the Syrians and the Latins at Alengadu and Verapoly respectively. In 1784 both were brought under roof at Verapoly and in 1866 it was raised to a major seminary of the Malabar. Being an important seminary for the training of the clergies in Kerala, the Syrians and the Latins continue their fight to have control over the administration of the seminary and have the possession of the property.²⁴ In the meantime the Malabar Vicariate was erected in 1659 and it embraced all the churches of Latin-Syriac and Syro-Chaldaic rites. Therefore, in 1887 the first ever Catholic Directory of India was published having a new concept that the Latin-Syriac rites.²⁵ The following diagram will show the division of Catholic Church in Kerala.



The Vicariate of Malabar was established in 1659 by Pope Alexander VI. This Vicariate was transformed into the Archdiocese of Verapoly by Pope Leo XIII in 1886. In 1887 the Syrians of the diocese were placed under a separate administrator namely Marcellino Bernard of St. Teresa, OCD. In 1930 the Archdiocese of Verapoly came to the hands of Indian clergy and in 1934 Dr. Joseph Attipetty became the first Indian Archbishop of Verapoly and the Latin hierarchy in Malabar.²⁶

The pre-Portuguese Church in Kerala was purely Syrian. The Latin community has its members from Hindu converts and Latinised Syrians. The Portuguese missionaries particularly the Jesuits tried every ways means to Latinise the local Syrian community under the pretext that to maintain a uniform Catholic Church. Though the Syrians were tolerant towards the emergence of Latin community, they were not willing to abandon their native customs and

beliefs. When Latinisation was imposed them, they violently opposed it and liberated themselves from the clutches of the foreign missionaries. This struggle led to the autonomy of Syrian community. Even then they have a inter-communal relationship between the Syrians and the Latins.

Notes and References

¹ Census of India - Kerala, 2021, p. 225.

² Brown, L. W., *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, Cambridge, 1956, p. 11.

³ *Acts of Thomas* is an apocryphal work written probably at Edessa or somewhere in upper Mesopotamia towards the close of the second or third century.

⁴ Mundadan, A. M., "Origin of Christianity in India" in *Christianity in India*, Perumalil & Hambye (Ed.), Prakasam Publications, 1972, pp. 15-22.

⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 22-23

⁶ John Arakkal & Co., "Alienation or Liberation", in *Jeevadhara*, January-February, 1977, pp.25-26

⁷ Mundadan, A. M., *Traditions of Thomas Christians*, Bangalore, 1970, p. 99.

⁸ Hambye, "Medieval Christianity in India" in *Christianity in India*, Perumalil & Hambye (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 31-33

¹⁰ George Koilparampil, *Caste in the Catholic Community in Kerala*, Cochin, 1982, p.73.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 72-73

¹² *Ibid*, p. 74

¹³ Pylee, L. M., "The Latin Rite in Kerala" in *St. Thomas Christian Encyclopedia*, Trichur, 1973, p.59

¹⁴ Thomas Thayil, "The Origin of the Latin Christians of Kerala" in *St. Thomas Christian Encyclopedia*, Trichur, 1973, p.61

¹⁵ Mathew Vattakuzhy, "The Three Rites in Malabar" in *St. Thomas Christian Encyclopedia*, Trichur, 1973, p. 52

¹⁶ Thomas Thayil, *op. cit.*, p. 64

¹⁷ George Mark Moraes, *A History of Christianity in India*, Bombay, 1964, p.85

¹⁸ George Mark Moraes, "Latin Church" in *Christianity in India*, Perumalil and Hambye (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 43-45

¹⁹ Wicki, S. J., "The Portuguese Padroado in India in the 16th century and St. Francis Xavier" in *Christianity in India*, Perumalil & Hambye (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 46-49

²⁰ Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, St. Paul Publications, 1970, p.139

²¹ Brown, L. W., *op. cit.*, pp.35-38

²² Mundadan, A. M., "The Eastern Church in 16th and 17th centuries" in *Christianity in India*, Perumalil & Hambye (Ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 96-99

²³ Podipara, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-156

²⁴ Pascal, V. A., *The Latin and Syrian Hierarchies of Malabar*, Ernakulam, 1937, p. 60

²⁵ *Catholic Directory of India*, 1887, p. 138

²⁶ *Catholic Directory of India*, 1977, C. B. C. I. Ashok Place, New Delhi, p. 32