

A Concise History of the Nasrani Christians of Kerala and the  
Continuation of the Church of the East in India

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## INTRODUCTION

The ancient Saint Thomas Christians of Kerala are known as ‘Nasranis’ or ‘Nasrai Mappilla’. ‘Nasrani’ is a term meaning ‘Christian’ and appears to be derived from Nazareth. Mappilla is an honorific applied to members of non-Indian faiths, including Muslims. Some Christians of the former Kingdom of Travancore still continue to use this honorific title. The Saint Thomas Christians are often called Syrian Christians because of their ancient connection to the Church of the East and thus the use Syriac as their liturgical language. Syriac is a derivative of Aramaic, the language of Christ, and is, for my purposes, divided here between East Syriac and West Syriac (example pronunciation: East - mAr, West – mOr). Yet another term for them is Malabar or Malankara Mar Thoma Nasranis, as Kerala was also known as Malabar or Malankara. Their indigenous language is Malayalam.

## THE APOSTLE THOMAS IN INDIA

Many Western scholars initially rejected the tradition of Saint Thomas’s evangelisation of India as pure legend as there is no direct evidence to support the claim. Saint Thomas Christians usually retorted by asking Western Christians to show the hard evidence that Saint Peter went to Rome! Their point is that the emphasis placed on a lack of direct evidence as well as a predilection to scepticism blinded them to the actual documented history that does exist and thus paradoxically shows their deep ignorance of the world of Saint Thomas’s time.

Father Henri Hostens SJ in his magnum opus *Antiquities from San Thoma and Mylapore* compiled more research on this subject than most other modern scholars. Many were surprised to find that the question of Saint Thomas’s coming to India was very much a live historical theory.

The Saint Thomas Christians have a full ancient historical understanding of the Apostle’s evangelisation and this has been reinforced through the practice of oral histories that form part of the sociological framework of the caste system. As each caste has a very subtle position in the society this is strengthened through epic historical narratives of how they came to occupy this position and how they achieved the rights and privileges they enjoy (itihasa-puranas). This is undergirded by sophisticated narrative genealogies (vamshavalis). As well as the oral tradition of bardic song, they also possessed hard evidence in the form of copper plates given by the Kings and rulers that outline their place and privileges in society.

The Malankara tradition says that Saint Thomas came to Kodungallur (Cranganore) or Mahadevapattanam. It was known to the rest of the world as Muziris. This port provided trade to the West

by means of the predictable monsoon winds that would blow ships across the Arabian ocean during certain months and then blow them back again a few months later. This provided direct access to Alexandria and Aden with easy access up the Indus to Taxila/ Gandhara, as well as Ormuz and Seleucia-Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia. If you hugged the coastlines and braved the Straits of Malacca you could also use the port to trade with imperial China in the east.

The older external Persian or Syriac version of this story stress that the Apostle came overland and arrived in the Indo-Parthian north and that he later went south. Both versions share basically the same story about a king who commissions a royal palace to be built for him by the Apostle and the martyrdom in Myapore.

The earliest source of the story of Saint Thomas in India is found in the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* of an unknown provenance. The oldest surviving manuscripts date it to at least the third or fourth century but contextual details and content make it quite possible that it was written in the second century. Thus the *Acts of Thomas* is the oldest surviving account left by a Christian community beyond the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire.

*The Acts* not only link Saint Thomas to India but also to the Babylonian congregations in Edessa (the capital of the small principality of Osroene squashed between the Roman and Persian Empires). From Edessa come further elaborations on the story including the Agbar legend of Judas Thomas, their own version of *The Acts*, as well as famous hymns by Saint Ephrem (Emphraem) of Edessa. Later versions of *The Acts* were copied in Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopic, Greek and Latin.

The story tells how the Apostles in the Upper Room divided the world into regions for them to go and evangelise. Saint Thomas receives India and is not at all happy and refuses to go. His brother Apostles pray for him to repent and go and their prayer is answered when that night Jesus appears in a dream and directly asks him to go. He grumbles, giving many Jonahish excuses why he can't go but eventually consents. As the dream is happening an Indian envoy arrives from the south with orders from King Gundaphar, an Indo-Parthian ruling an area of what is now the Punjab and Afghanistan, to bring back a skilled merchant to build him a royal palace. Jesus himself goes to greet the merchant and giving his credentials as a carpenter sells him his servant Thomas for twenty pieces of silver and even writes out a bill of sale. He then fetches Saint Thomas and gives him to the merchant who, after ascertaining if Jesus really is his Lord and Master, takes him as his slave and boards a ship to sail for the East. Several romantic adventures follow before they reach India.

When he reaches the court of King Gundaphar (Gondaphorus, Gondophares) he is given a huge treasure and told to have the new royal palace ready before he returns from a lengthy pilgrimage. The Apostle Thomas is horrified by the social inequality that he finds in the kingdom with the wealthy having little or no care for the poor and destitute. So in rebellion against the opulence of the powerful he distributes the entire treasure to the poorest and most oppressed to alleviate their suffering. He spends his time teaching the 'Good News', healing the sick, casting out demons and proclaiming the New God. When the king returns and asks to see his new palace Saint Thomas tells him that it has been built and that it awaits him in heaven. Not surprisingly, the king orders him to be executed. That evening the king's brother Gad dies and on entering heaven beholds the magnificence of the 'royal palace' that Saint Thomas had built for his brother. He then requests a boon that he might come back to life just to inform his brother what he has seen and he is given it. When the king hears the news from his dead brother he calls off the execution, and converts to Christianity as well as his whole court. His new converts receive anointing with oil (called the 'seal'), baptism (called the 'added seal') and communion (called 'bread and wine'). The ordination of deacons and priests quickly follows.

*The Acts of Thomas* records further adventures after he leaves the court to travel across India but most of the rest of the book deals with his martyrdom at Mylapore (or Mailapur which is now a suburb of Madras which is now called Chennai). Owing to the conversion of many prominent women in the court of the king, including the queen, which disrupts the marital relations of the king and his royal officials, Brahmins are sent to kill Saint Thomas with a trident spear. His body is then buried on Thomas Mount outside the city.

Much of the *Acts of Thomas* has a romantic epic quality that is obviously of questionable historical accuracy. However the general story line is surprisingly possible. Scholars such as Farquhar, Medlycott (later of Westminster), Dahmann and Mingana make such an argument. From numismatic and archaeological discoveries we now know that there was a king named Gundaphar (spelled Gondophares in Greek), that he had a brother Gad, and that he did indeed reign over a large Indo-Parthian kingdom. The kingdom lasted from at least the year 19AD to 55AD before northern Kushana forces destroyed it. This was only discovered in the last 200 years when a huge cache of coins were found bearing his name.

Much of the supporting evidence for the Saint Thomas tradition relies upon internal sources in south India. These consist of: carefully preserved oral sages; literary texts; genealogies; epigraphic and numismatic data on stone and copper plates; coins of copper silver and gold; and archaeological remains. Six ancient stone crosses that some claim date to the 2nd century can be found at: Quilon; Niranam;

Kotamangalam; Kottukkayal (Paravur); Chayal; and Palayur, although having seen these and noted the lack of historical documentation I believe are of a later date.

The indigenous narrative tell the story of Saint Thomas: landing on the small island of Malankara or on the coastal side of Malabar; living there for many years; sailing to Mylapore before going to China; returning to Malabar and settling at Kodungallur where he strengthened the original seven congregations he founded when he first came; training leaders from the high-caste families; and then departing back to Mylapore where he was martyred by Brahmin for refusing to participate in worship of the goddess Kali.

The *Thomma Parvam* is the earliest record (supposedly 48 generations earlier than the first written version of 1601). It is still sung at special occasions such as weddings among Saint Thomas Christians. The song relates how Saint Thomas arrived in December of the year 52, converted Jews at Kodungallur, how the king allowed his nephew to be ordained a kattanar (priest) before the Apostle went to Quilon where he baptised 1,400 people and set up a cross. Afterwards he went to the Chola Rajas in Mylapore where the same story of the building of the royal place and the raising of the king's dead brother found in the *Acts of Thomas* is recounted. When he was out walking from his hermitage on Little Mount he encountered Brahmins processing the goddess Kali to a sacred grove. Upon refusing to worship her and the subsequent mysterious fire that destroyed the grove he was martyred.

The best known poetic version of the story gives a complicated demographic and social breakdown (varnashramadharma) of the hereditary castes of the early Thomas Christians: 6,850 Brahmins; 2,800 Kshatriyas; 3,750 Vaishiyas; 4,250 Shudras; and Dalits (untouchables) and Adivasis (aboriginals) are not mentioned at all. The lists go further in mentioning exactly how many miracles and of what kind occurred.

Other oral traditions, copper plates, stone inscriptions and palm leaf manuscripts (many still in the hands of hereditary Nasrani families) give a myriad of details about travels, and the places visited or lived at by Saint Thomas. From these immerses the fact that many Nasrani families and communities trace their particular conversion to the time of the Apostle, or to one of the waves of immigration of Christians to Malabar long before the arrival of the Portuguese. Many vamshvalis and puranas also claim hereditary authority even of the kattanars or metrans (bishops or elders) who descended generation after generation from uncle to sister's son (Kerala is an area of matriarchal descent). This hereditary 'apostolic succession' allows some families to trace back the office holders up to 70 unbroken generations. There are four senior Nasrani families of Namboodiri Brahman origin who trace their conversion to the Apostle - Sankarapuri, Pakalomattam, Kalli, and Kaliyankal. There are many more elite Christian families some

of whom can back up their claims with ancient artefacts preserved by the family. Many of these artefacts extend the story of Saint Thomas's evangelisation of India further by giving many other details left out by the *Tomma Parvam* such as giving the year of his martyrdom as 72AD.

So although the evidence of the Apostle's evangelisation of India is inconclusive as much of the evidence is circumstantial, the plausibility of the historical account cannot be lightly dismissed. The tradition is as firmly rooted in India as that of other early Christian tradition that are also built on shaky historical ground. So despite the many, parallel, and ancient sources not being enough to claim total acceptance of the tradition, neither is there sufficient ground amidst the numerous strands of complex circumstantial evidence to reject it out of hand. Although some of the more fanciful accretions to the story cloud the original sources this is not a reason to question those sources. The commentaries of the Apostolic age and the Patristic age are reliable enough to accept that Saint Thomas has been venerated as the Apostle of India from the earliest days of the Christian faith. The Church in Malabar believes this, and historical scholarship shows it may very well be true.

## EARLY SOURCES

As already mentioned, the earliest known source connecting the Apostle to India is the apocryphal book *The Acts of Thomas*. The text describes Thomas's adventures evangelising India, a tradition later expanded upon in early Indian sources such as the 'Thomma Parvam' ("Song of Thomas"). *The Acts of Thomas* hints that Saint Thomas came to India with a Jewish trader. Here he converted many in the communities near his landing spot to Christianity. The Scottish historian William Dalrymple travelled across the Arabian Sea to Kerala in a boat similar to those mentioned in Roman texts to show how the traders had travelled from the Middle East to Kodungulloor. He followed the same course as mentioned in *The Acts of Thomas*.

These early communities would have been multi-ethnic and included native Indians of Aryan, Dravidian and Naga ethnicity who could have been baptized by Saint Thomas as well as members of the different trading diasporas of Jews as well as Christian settlers who came later. They may also have included groups such as the Knanaya people (an early Jewish group of converts to Christianity who still retain their Jewish ethnicity and customs).

In 190AD, Pantaenus from Alexandria visited these Christians and found that they were using the Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew. Eusebius of Caesarea reports that Pantaenus had been told that this Gospel book

had been brought to them by the Apostle Bartholomew. St Jerome reported that Demetrius of Alexandria had sent Pantaenus to India where he

*“found that Bartholomew, one of the twelve Apostles, had preached the Advent of the Lord Jesus according to the Gospel of Mathew, and on his return to Alexandria he brought this with him written in Hebrew characters.”*

The Tamil epic of Manimekkalai written between the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD mentions the Saint Thomas Christian people by the name Essanis referring to one of the early Jewish-Christian sects within the Nasranis called Essenes. A number of 3rd- and 4th-century Roman writers mention Thomas's trip to India including St Ambrose of Milan -

*“When the Lord Jesus said to the Apostles, go and teach all nations, even the kingdoms that had been shut off by the barbaric mountains lay open to them as India to Thomas, as Persia to Mathew.”,*

St Gregory of Nazianzus -

*“What! were not the Apostles foreigners? Granting that Judea was the country of Peter, what had Saul to do with the Gentiles, Luke with Achaia, Andrew with Epirus, Thomas with India, Mark with Italy?,*

St Jerome, and St Ephraim the Syrian -

*“It was to a land of dark people he was sent, to clothe them by Baptism in white robes. His grateful dawn dispelled India's painful darkness. It was his mission to espouse India to the One-Begotten. The merchant is blessed for having so great a treasure. Edessa thus became the blessed city by possessing the greatest pearl India could yield. Thomas works miracles in India, and at Edessa Thomas is destined to baptize peoples perverse and steeped in darkness, and that in the land of India.”*

— *Hymns of St. Ephraem, edited by Lamy (Ephr. Hymni et Sermones, IV).*

These all demonstrate that the tradition of the evangelisation of India by Saint Thomas the Apostle was a well known.

According to the 7th century Chronicle of Seert Bishop David of Basra under Patriarch Mar Papa of Seleucia-Ctesiphon evangelised India in the year 295. However we only have this one source for this information. So whatever its earlier origins, an organised Christian presence in India dates at least to the arrival of East Syrian settlers and missionaries from Edessa or Iraq, traditionally under the leadership of Thomas of Cana, members of the Church of the East, in 345AD although there is no historical evidence to back up this tradition. King Charaman Perumal supposedly gave permission for these Christians to settle in Kerala. Around AD 522, an Egyptian Monk, Cosmas Indicopleustes visited the Malabar Coast and mentions the Christians of Malabar in his book *Christian Topography – Book Three*.

*“The Gospel has been preached throughout the world. This I state to be definite fact from what I have seen and heard in the many places i have visited...in the country called Male (Malabar) where pepper grows, there is also a church, and at another place called Kalliana (Kalyan, Mumbai) there is moreover a bishop, who is appointed from Persia.”*

Saint Thomas Christians trace the further growth of their community to the arrival of more Nestorian traders from the Middle East in 825AD. They had their own bishops visiting them from Persia and these were welcomed by the Saint Thomas Christians as these bishops made no effort to subjugate them. The subgroup of the Saint Thomas Christians known as the Southists trace their lineage to Thomas of Cana’s Assyrian Christians, while the group known as the Northists claim descent from Saint Thomas the Apostle’s indigenous converts.

As the community grew and immigration by East Syrians increased, the connection with the Church of the East, centred in the Persian capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, strengthened. From the early 4th century the Patriarch of the Church of the East provided India with clergy, holy texts, and an ecclesiastical infrastructure. It is documented that Mar John, the Bishop of Great India, attended the council of Nicaea in 325 and signed himself as ‘John the Persian presiding over the Churches in the whole of Persia and Great India.’ In 350AD Mar Aprem the Syrian wrote hymns about St Thomas’s evangelisation of India:

*“Blessed art Thou, like unto the solar ray from the great orb; thy grateful dawn India's painful darkness doth dispel. Thou the great lamp, one among the Twelve, with oil from the cross-replenished, India’s dark night flooded with light.*

*Blessed art Thou whom the great King has sent, that India is to his One-Begotten thou shouldst espouse; above snow and linen white, thou the dark bride didst make fair*

*Blessed art Thou, O thrice-blessed city; Thou hast acquired this pearl, none greater doth India yield*

*Blessed art Thou, worthy to possess the precious gem! Praise to Thee O gracious Son, Who does thee adore does enrich."*

Around 650 Patriarch Ishoyahb III solidified the Church of the East's jurisdiction over the Saint Thomas Christian community. In the 8th century Patriarch Timothy I organised the community as the Ecclesiastical Province of India, one of the church's 'illustrious Provinces of the Exterior'. After this point the Province of India was headed by a metropolitan bishop, provided from Persia, the "Metropolitan-Bishop of the Seat of Saint Thomas and the Whole Christian Church of India". His Metropolitan see was probably in Cranganore, or (perhaps nominally) in Mylapore, the traditional place of Saint Thomas's martyrdom and where his shrine was located. Under him were a varying number of Assyrian bishops, as well as a native hereditary Archdeacon, who not only had authority over the clergy and who wielded a great amount of secular power but also acted as the indigenous cultural 'head' of the church as far as the caste system went.

The Rulers of Kerala gave the Nasranis various rights and privileges written on copper plates. These are known as Cheppeds, Royal Grants, or Sasanam. There are a number of such documents: Thazhekad Sasanam; The Quilon Plates (Tharisappalli Cheppeds); Mampally Sasanam; and Iraviikothan Chepped (Copper Plate). Some of these plates date to 774 AD. The language used is Tamil in Tamil letters with some Grantha script intermingled. The Quilon Copper Plates which were given to Mar Sapor and Mar Prodh, brothers (referred to as Kaddisangal or Saints by the Church of the East) who immigrated to Quilon from Persia in 823 AD, and also include some Pahlavi, Kufic and Hebrew signatures. The plates show that the ruler of Venad (Travancore) granted Syrian Christians seventy two rights and privileges usually granted only to high dignitaries, including exemption from import duties, sales tax and the slave tax. Yet another copper plate from 1225 further enhanced the rights and privileges of the Nasranis. These copper plates are considered some of the most important historical legal documents in Kerala.

There are many accounts of foreign visitors from the West and Western missionary activity in India before the arrival of Portuguese. In 883AD, Alfred the Great, King of Wessex reportedly sent gifts to Mar Thoma Christians of India through Sighelm, Bishop of Sherborne. Around 1292AD, Marco Polo on his return journey from China visited Kerala, mentions that,

*"The people are idolaters, though there are some Christians and Jews among them".*

John of Monte Corvino was a Franciscan sent to China and became prelate of Peking in 1307. From Persia he travelled by sea to south India, or 'The Country of St. Thomas', in 1291. He stayed to preach and baptise for thirteen months. Monte Corvino wrote home in December 1291 (or 1292) leaving us one of the earliest noteworthy accounts of the Malabar coast written by a Western European.

Odoric of Pordenone arrived in India in 1321. He visited Malabar landing at Pandarani, Cranganore, and Quilon before sailing to Ceylon and then onto the shrine of Saint Thomas at Mailapur. He excitedly reported that he had found the place where Saint Thomas was buried. Father Jordanus, a Dominican, followed in 1321–22. He reported to Rome, apparently from somewhere on the west coast of India, that he had given a Christian burial to four martyred monks. Between 1324 and 1328 he seems to have visited Quilon and selected it as his ecclesiastical centre. He was appointed a bishop in 1328 and nominated by Pope John XXII in his bull *Venerabili Fratri Jordano* to the see of Columbum or Quilon on 21 August 1329. This was the first Roman Catholic diocese in the whole of the Indies, with jurisdiction over modern India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burma, and Sri Lanka. Either before going out to Malabar as bishop, or during a later visit to the west, Jordanus probably wrote his *Mirabilia*. This work is one of the best account of the regions of India and its products; climate; manners; customs; and fauna and flora given by any European in the Middle Ages.

In 1347, Giovanni de' Marignolli visited the shrine of St Thomas in South India, and then proceeded to what he calls the kingdom of Saba, which he identifies with the Sheba of Scripture, but which actually seems to have been Java. A prominent Indian traveler was Joseph, a priest from Cranganore who journeyed to Babylon in 1490 and then sailed to Europe and visited Portugal, Rome, and Venice before returning to India. He helped to write a book about his travels titled *The Travels of Joseph the Indian* which was widely disseminated across Europe.

## KONNEN CROSS

After the Portuguese arrived on the Malabar Coast in the sixteenth century, in 1552, a split occurred within the Assyrian Church of the East forming the Chaldean Church which later entered into communion with Rome. After the split each church had its own patriarch; the Chaldean Church was headed by the Patriarch Mar Yohannan Sulaqa (1553–1555). Both claim to be the rightful heir to the East Syrian tradition. It is very difficult to see the precise influence of this schism on the Church of Malabar. Apparently, both parties sent bishops to India. The last East Syrian Metropolitan before the schism, Mar Jacob (1504–1552), died in 1552.

Catholicos Simeon VII Denkha sent a prelate to India, in the person of Mar Abraham, who was later to be the last Syrian Metropolitan of Malabar, after having gone over to the Chaldean side. It is not known when he arrived in Malabar, but he must have been there 1556. At the same time, Chaldean Patriarch Abdisho IV (1555–1567), the successor of Yohannan Sulaqa (murdered in 1555), sent the brother of John, Mar Joseph, to Malabar as a Chaldean bishop; although consecrated in 1555 or 1556, Mar Joseph did not reach India before the end of 1556, nor Malabar before 1558. He was accompanied by another Chaldean bishop, Mar Eliah.

The original tradition of the Syro-Malabar Nasranis was all but wiped out when the Portuguese acquired dominance in Kerala, and denounced Nasrani Christianity as heretical. They imposed Western Catholic rituals and liturgy and systematically suppressed the indigenous Indian church.

Archbishop Menezes of Goa, convened the Synod of Diamper in 1599. There he ordered all the texts of the Syrian Nasranis to be burned. It seems as if he was remarkably successful as nothing has survived. The purpose stated by Menezes was to erase all legacies of antiquity and Jewishness. Amongst several accusations, the Nasranis were accused of not venerating images of saints and Biblical figures.

The oppressive rule of the Portuguese Padroado provoked a violent reaction on the part of the indigenous Christian community. The first solemn protest took place in 1653, known as the Koonan Kurishu Satyam (Koonan Cross Oath). Under the leadership of Archdeacon Thomas, Saint Thomas Christians publicly took an oath in Matancherry, Cochin, that,

*"by the Father, Son and Holy Ghost that henceforth we would not adhere to the Franks, nor accept the faith of the Pope of Rome"*

Four months afterwards twelve elders of the church laid their hands on Malankara Mooppen (Archdeacon) Thomas and ordained him as Mar Thoma I. The branch of the church that did not take the oath and thus was affiliated with the Catholic Church was designated the Pazhayakuttukar, or 'Old faction', while the branch affiliated with Mar Thoma was called the Puthankuttukar, or 'New faction'.

Between 1661 and 1662, out of the 116 churches on record, the Old Faction held eighty-four churches, while Mar Thoma I held thirty-two churches. The Syro-Malabar Catholic Church and Chaldean Syrian Church (as they split off at a much later date) claim descent from the Old Faction. Those who continued with East Syrian and Latin theological and liturgical tradition and stayed faithful to the Synod of Diamper and the Roman Catholic Church became known as the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church. They received

their own Hierarchy on 21 December 1923. The Syrian Christians of Malabar claim descent from the New Faction.

In 1665 Mar Gregorios Abdul Jaleel, sent by the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, was welcomed by the New Faction. This marks the beginning of the formal association of St. Thomas Christians with the West Syrian Church. Those who accepted the West Syrian theological and liturgical tradition of Mar Gregorios became known as Jacobites. Although it may seem strange to ecclesiastical historians that East Syrian Christians would accept a West Syrian prelate without fuss, it should be remembered that the knowledge of the difference between East and West Syrians was less important than the difference between Syrian and Western Catholic. It also seems likely that the Christological differences between the Church of the East and the Antiochians was probably unknown. The only discernable difference would probably have been the different pronunciation of Syrian and the different liturgical rites. Yet even if the profound theological differences were known there was little choice but to accept a Syrian Bishop or go without – beggars can't be choosers as they say.

#### CHALDEAN SYRIAN CHURCH

The metropolitan jurisdiction of the Church of the East in India is officially named the Chaldean Syrian Church. It primarily exists in the city and surroundings of Thrissur. Its present origins begin in 1796 when the Maharaja of Cochin, Shakthan Thampuran, brought fifty two Christian families from around the State to settle in Thrissur. A church for them was built in 1814 and consecrated the following year by Father Abraham Palai who, as directed by a Royal Charter of the Maharaja, used the "Chaldean Syrian Rite". This is the origin of the name of their church.

Until the coming of the first bishop in 1861 there seems to have been no continuity of ministry in Thrissur. There are records of a Chaldean priest, Father Denha Beriona, visiting and conducting services in 1849 but besides this it is surmised that the Christians in Thrissur visited the neighbouring churches in Ollur and Aranattukara for services and borrowed priests to come to Thrissur to conduct services.

The Chaldean Patriarch Joseph Audo VI played a significant role in the history of the East Syrian community in Thrissur. He had a long and bitter feud with the Vatican and at various times during his Patriarchate was threatened with excommunication and other ecclesiastical sanctions. More often than not it was hard to tell whether he was 'in revolt' and thus renegade or 'in good standing'. The Most famous acts of disobedience being: in 1860 his agreement to send a Bishop to India in spite of the protest of the Apostolic Delegate Henri Amanton; in 1870 his passionate opposition to the doctrine of Papal

Infallibility, his refusal to accept it and his political machinations with the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire against the Vatican over it; and in 1874 when he sent Mar Mellus to India without permission from the Vatican which resulted in Mar Mellus's excommunication. Each of these acts of disobedience was eventually resolved by forcing his submission using fierce pressure from the Vatican. Just before he died he was, once again, reconciled with Rome.

His first influence on the church in India began with the arrival of Mar Roccas in 1861 whom he sent to India at the request of East Syrian lay leaders who wanted a bishop. Mar Roccas was opposed by Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the founder of the Syrian Romanist congregation Third Order of Discalced Carmelites which later became CMI - the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate. He had ascertained that Mar Roccas had not been sent by Rome but rather by the renegade Chaldean Patriarch. The Vatican successfully brought enough pressure to bear on the Patriarch for him to agree to withdraw him. Mar Roccas was forcibly put on a boat at Cochin and sent back to Mesopotamia. With him went a young priest Father Anthony Thondanata, who supposedly jumped on the boat as it was settling sail. He was encouraged to sail with Mar Roccas by resentful laity who still desired an East Syrian bishop. They hoped he could help ensure the survival of East Syrian Christianity in India by lobbying for another East Syrian bishop to be sent to them. When the Patriarch declined to consecrate Father Thondanata or anyone else as a bishop for India out of fear of further antagonising the Pope, Father Thomdatta sought out the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Church of the East, Mar Rewil Shimun, who consented to consecrate him as Metropolitan of Malabar and India.

Anthony Thondanata, now Mar Abdisho, returned to Cochin in 1863 but the community who had encouraged him to go with Mar Roccas now refused to accept him as he had been consecrated by the 'Nestorian' Catholicos-Patriarch instead of the Chaldean Patriarch. They forced him to shave his beard, the sign of his elevation, and he returned to work as a parish priest in the State of Travancore. The community in Thrissur, ignorant of Mar Abdisho's return, continued to seek an East Syrian bishop.

Meanwhile, in 1870, the Chaldean Patriarch and his scholarly archbishop Mar Elia Mellus attended the First Vatican Council in Rome. There the Patriarch and Mar Mellus publically protested the adoption of the doctrine of the Infallibility of the Pope and infamously walked out of the Council. Mar Mellus was subsequently sent by the Patriarch as Metropolitan of Malabar and India. He arrived in Thrissur with his aide, Cor-episcopus Michael Augustine, in 1874.

Upon his arrival he enquired into the whereabouts of Mar Abdisho and found the people ignorant of both his existence and whereabouts. Eventually he was found working in his parish in Travancore and brought

before the new Metropolitan where his priestly dress and lack of any episcopal accoutrements deeply distressed him. The Metropolitan recognised Mar Abdisho's rank of Metropolitan by placing his own pectoral cross around his neck. It is important to realise that, although Mar Abdisho had been consecrated by the Nestorian Catholicos-Patriarch, Mar Mellus (under the renegade Chaldean Patriarch) not only recognised his consecration and rank but also his jurisdiction. Mar Abdisho then worked with Mar Mellus until the later was recalled to Mesopotamia eight years later after the death of the Patriarch by his successor. He was eventually reconciled with Pope Leo XIII in 1899 and died as Bishop of Mardin in 1908.

In 1875 Mar Philip Jacob Abraham was also sent to join Mellus by the Catholicos-Patriarch. He worked in Kuruvilangat and then in Thrissur until he was kidnapped in 1877 by the Vicar Apostolic of Bombay, Monsignor Meurin. When the laity sought out the Vicar Apostolic he engaged them in a debate about the term Theotokos, and then left with their bishop who was deported.

With neither Mar Mellus or Mar Jacob left in India, Cor-episcopa Michael Augustine administered the East Syriac Rite Church while Mar Abdisho continued to look after his parish in Travancore. He only travelled to Thrissur for major feasts when the community had need of a Metropolitan or bishop. Mar Abdisho was engaged in a lengthy legal battle with the Roman Catholics over ownership of his parish. He lost the case in 1897 and without a parish or home he was invited to come and live in Thrissur. He accepted the offer and lived in Thrissur for three years until his death in 1900. His body was buried in the Altar of the Cathedral church where it remained until its translation in 1954.

Upon his death Cor-episcopus Michael Anthony proceeded to rule the church for eight years until, after his request to have a bishop consecrated for India was granted by the Catholicos-Patriarch of the East Mar Benjamin Shimun, and Mar Abimalek Timotheus arrived as Metropolitan in 1908. The Syriac letter answering Cor-episcopus Michael Anthony's request for a Metropolitan was drafted by the Catholicos-Patriarch's Archdeacon who, as it happened, would be the very man sent to fill that post. The framed letter hangs in the entry hall of the Metropolitan Palace in Thrissur.

Mar Abimalek Timotheus was educated by the Church of England under the auspices of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian Mission, his tutors being The Rev'd A.J. Maclean (Later Bishop of Moray, Ross and Caithness in Scotland) and The Rev'd Dr W.H. Browne who was sent in 1907 by the Archbishop of Canterbury to Thrissur to ensure the suitability of the posting.

Mar Timotheus's arrival as Metropolitan, though the realisation of a long held hope, was the cause of further tensions. He was enthusiastically welcomed by the laity but although Cor-episcopa Michael Augustine has requested the appointment of a Metropolitan for India he was unable to find it in himself to give up leadership. He thus insisted that Mar Timotheus was sent to succeed him and that he had no authority until he died. This strange view led the Cor-episcopa to issue a legal suit against the new metropolitan just two weeks before he died.

The suit brought in 1911 lasted until 1925. The suit claimed: 1) that Mar Timotheus could only exercise authority after the death of Cor-episcopa Michael Augustine (rather a moot point as the latter was now dead) and; 2) that the new Metropolitan must conform to the current customs of the now 'Independent Chaldean' community and not change anything. This was significant because the worship in the cathedral, Mart Mariam Valiapally, did not conform with all of the Church of the East's practices. For example, the cathedral had statues and crucifixes whereas members of the Church of the East abhor images and only display a plain Persian cross with no corpus upon it. They possess no statues and no icons. Although Mar Timotheus won the case in 1919 there was an appeal and so it was still dragging through the courts. The Anglican Principal of Saint Stephen's College in Delhi suggested that Mar Timotheus approach the Maharaja of Cochin to issue a Royal Proclamation, if both parties agreed, appointing a Sole Arbitrator for settling the case. Both parties did agree and the Maharaja appointed the British Resident C.W.E. Cotton. In 1925 the British Resident awarded all property to Mar Timotheus. The 'Independent Chaldeans' gathered as a congregation and were ministered to by the assistant priest of the Syro-Malabar Cathedral. Eventually they would go on to build a Basilica, named after the Cathedral they had lost, that has the highest church tower in south-east Asia. Mar Timotheus served as Metropolitan of All India for over 37 years. He died in 1945 and was buried in the Prelates Mausoleum in Thrissur.

From 1945 until 1952 there was no bishop for the Church of the East in India. Finally after seven years the Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII sent Mar Thoma Darmo as the new Metropolitan of Malabar and India. He had served in North Syria and was chosen by Mar Yosip Khananisho Metropolitan of Iraq as a suitable candidate for India.

In time Mar Thoma Darmo developed strong differing opinions to the Catholicos- Patriarch. The Patriarchal visit to India in 1961 only succeeded in increasingly the difficulties between them. In January 1962 Mar Shimun wrote to Mar Thoma Darmo appointing an advisory board for the administration of the Indian church. When it was explained that the Church in India already had elected Central Trustees established in law for the administration of the church the request was simply repeated. The Metropolitan refused to comply and the Catholicos-Patriarch suspended him on the 10th of January 1964.

The major difference of opinion between the Catholicos-Patriarch and the Metropolitan centered on the issue of hereditary succession for the Patriarchate and the Episcopate. The Patriarchate had been held by the Shimun family since the middle of the 15th century passing from uncle to nephew in unbroken succession. This was also the case for the bishops and at this time Mar Thoma Darmo was the only non hereditary bishop in the Church of the East.

When The Catholicose-Patriarch issued a universal order for the adoption of the Gregorian calendar in March of 1964 the strain was too great and the Church of the East split between the Old Calendarists and the New Calendarists. In September of 1968 the Old Calendarists elected Mar Darmo their Catholicos-Patriarch and he left India permanently. After arriving in Baghdad he consecrated Mar Poulouse episcopa and Mar Aprem Metropolitan for India. Mar Darmo died in 1969.

Of course the split in India led to further lawsuits. The Old Calendarists were represented by Mar Aprem, who had returned to India after his consecration, while the New Calendarists only received a bishop in 1971 when a laymen was ordained to all orders and made Metropolitan - Mar Timotheus. He arrived in Thrissur in 1972. Both the new Metropolitans were natives of Thrissur and Indians.

Attempts to reconcile the two groups was further confused when the New Calendarists patriarch abolished episcopal celibacy and then promptly married and thus was deposed. After his reinstatement he was assassinated by an aggrieved family member. In 1976 Mar Dinkha IV was chosen by the Holy Synod of the New Calendarists as the first non hereditary Catholicos-Patriarch for almost five hundred years. Interestingly for Anglicans, the Holy Synod for the election took place in Alton Abbey whilst the consecration took place in Saint Barnabas Ealing.

One of Mar Dinkha IV's first actions was an attempt to end the schism in India. After failed attempts at arbitration he visited Thrissur himself in 1991 and was again unsuccessful. Finally after years of dialogue, litigation and negotiation the two groups were united in 1995 headed by Mar Aprem as Metropolitan while Mar Timotheus was made Apostolic Delegate to India, a post he held until he died in 2001. Mar Poulouse died in 1998. Mar Aprem continues as Metropolitan to this day.

## CONCLUSION

The depressing realisation one comes to when investigating the Church of the East in India is that there is little historical source material to bring clarity to the subject. Much is little more than vested cultural narratives (or as one Malankara Orthodox Metropolitan in charge of part of North America said to me

‘before you can make sense of any of this you have to realise it is all made up!’). We do know that the Church in India was under the Catholicos of the East for much of her history but it is unclear what this actually looked like on the ground. It is unclear whether the theological and Christological position of the Church of the East had any integrated influence on the Christianity of the Malabar Coast. The Nasrani Christians certainly had a hierarchical identity centered on the Catholicos but it seems possible that the Assyrian hierarchy in India was spotty and that social and cultural leadership was rather vested in the hereditary Archdeacon as the caste head of the community. What we do know from the Indian historical sources, such as the copper plates, is that the Nasrani were fully part of the Hindu caste system and integrated into its cultural norms. This coupled with the lack of any known monastic tradition in India, a distinguishing feature of Nestorian Christianity, suggests that the Church in India, as they often say of themselves, was - Hindu in culture, Christian in religion and Syrian in Liturgy.

It is also difficult to claim that the Church of the East has any continuity with the present day Christian communities. The largest group, the Syro-Malabar, have little liturgical or theological continuity with the Church of the East regardless of what they may claim. Although they began at the Synod of Diamper with East Syrian traditions they were Latinised over time leaving little but a sense of identity with East Syrian history, even if that was an idea that was not based on theology or liturgy but only language and a vague sense of historical continuity. The fact that they hold to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, possess statues and images in their churches, do not have curtains in their sanctuaries, use the rite of Addai and Mari with the Roman Words of Institution inserted (which even the Chaldean Catholics do not have to do) and do not use East Syrian are only the visible signs of the lack of any real continuity. All of their churches I visited were indistinguishable from Latin Roman Catholic ones.

The Koonen Cross Syrians also can claim no continuity with the Church of the East as they at various times accepted both Chaldean and Antiochian oversight. However I do believe a strong argument can be made that the Koonen Cross Christians deeply desired to stay Syrian and not be subsumed by the Roman Catholic Church. The fact that they did not seem to understand the theological, liturgical and ecclesiological difference between the Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, and the Church of Antioch only reinforces the idea that the Nasrani were not theological Nestorians but only cultural ones (even if this was solely because of a lack of education or knowledge). It does not suggest that they did not desire to stay in communion with the Catholicos of the East. Thus the present day West Syrians, which represent a large segment of Nasrani Christianity, could easily have remained Nestorian if Church of the East bishops had arrived to provide oversight instead of the hitherto alien Antiochian bishops after the Koonen Cross.

Although it is not for me to judge, I am troubled by the ‘Christianity’ that was indigenous to the Malabar Coast. There is much to suggest that the great privileges enjoyed by the Nasrani as a High Caste group effectively watered down the distinguishing social morality usually associated with Christianity. Interestingly, if this is not historically true, it is certainly true today. The large bodies of the more recent 19<sup>th</sup> century Missionary Christian communities outside of Kerala are still sharply critical of the Nasrani acceptance of the inequality of the caste system and this has led to a deep mistrust of the Syrian churches by the Indian Council of Churches. Circumstantially, I also observed an almost complete lack of social concern on the part of the Syrian bishops I interviewed with the marked exception of the Mar Thoma bishops.

The present existence of a Church of the East community in Thrissur seems to be little more than the internationalisation of the local power struggle on the part of a single congregation. The claim that the community was East Syrian, I believe, is disproved by the fact that the Cathedral had statues, crucifixes, and religious pictures that were removed during one of the numerous recent court cases and are now hidden under lock and key in an attic room of the Cathedral. That this was revealed to me by the present Metropolitan still confuses me. What is probable is that the original community was at an earlier stage in the process of Latinisation and thus had a much stronger concept of what it meant to be East Syrian than the majority of the communities that would later become Syro-Malabar. This may be due to their isolation in Thrissur that began less than 150 years after the Koonen Cross Oath, although it was almost 200 years since the Council of Diamper which does make the continuity of communal identity a bit less convincing.

The deep divisions that the inclusion of the Indian Metropolitan jurisdiction has had in the recent history of the Church of the East is troubling, especially its involvement with the current schism in the Church of the East which led to the formation of the Ancient Church of the East (the ‘Old Calendarists’). It is also worth noting that there is a strong tension between the current identification of the Church of the East with the Assyrian people and nation (especially the present Catholicos’s emphasis on this by renaming the church the ‘Assyrian Orthodox Church of the East’) and the inclusion of three Indian bishops. It seemed clear to me that the Indian bishops are treated as second class bishops and tolerated as opposed to being embraced as a manifestation of the broader historical identity of the Church of the East.

The current decision of the Catholicos to consecrate two Indian bishops instead of the one requested by Mar Aprem and the subsequent decision to divide the diocesan parishes and clergy between them is most unfortunate. The very different views of the two new bishops could not be any further apart. One wishes

to dispense with many of the traditional trappings of the Church of the East to be more relevant to the local community whilst the other believes that the most important thing to do is to re-educate the clergy and laity to worship in the East Syrian language. The fact that the clergy and parishes are already divided between them and tensions already exist as to what is expected by their respective bishops, the deep differences in priorities of the bishops, and the failing health of the Metropolitan (currently the longest serving bishop in India with an episcopate spanning forty three years) who is the stabilising force for the community spells trouble. I believe that if the more progressive (and more self effacing, less political, and less ego centered) bishop is appointed the next Metropolitan then I believe the Church of the East in India will once again enter into schism. After so many years seeking reunion it is deeply depressing to see the community once again facing division especially because of tensions that simply did not need to be introduced in the first place. If I believed the Catholicos to be more Machiavellian (which I do not) I would conclude that this was a move to try and intentionally destabilise the Indian jurisdiction. However, I must regretfully conclude that this was simply ineptitude and a lack of even the most basic concept of community management (that most Western clergy learn during their formative seminary years).

#### DISCLAMIER

This paper is compiled of pieces I wrote for the Saint Basil Scholarship during my sabbatical in India during the first four months of 2012 living with the Assyrian Church in Thrissur and the Malankara Orthodox in Kottayam. To my lasting discredit as someone pretending to be engaged in a scholarly pursuit, I have not kept records of my source material for much of what I wrote and thus am unable to provide any reliable footnotes. I recognise the serious limitations that this entails and fully expect my grade for this paper to reflect this.

The latter part of this paper that deals with the history of the Church in the East in Thrissur was written after a series of in depth interviews with Mar Aprem and personally checked for accuracy by him. Although he is a key player in the recent history of the Church of the East in India and thus has a vested interest in a particular historical narrative, he is well known as an ecclesiastical historian and I believe his vested interest is mitigated by his academic integrity as well as his candidness about the numerous unsavoury elements contained in this account.