

«Hindu in culture, Christian in religion, and Oriental in worship»¹. Thus, the style of their socio-cultural life has been in accordance with the general ethos of Indian society and they drew profusely from the local culture.

1. Historicity and Demography

In the cognitive map of the average Westerner, Christianity in India is a product of British colonialism. Pre-colonial Christianity of India is the Syrian Christianity of south India². Further, an eminent historian of Kerala, A. R. Sreedhara Menon writes, «Christianity is believed to have been introduced in Kerala in the first century AD, i. e. three centuries before it gained official recognition in Rome... Since its introduction, the Christian faith, though alien in its origin, came to be accepted as an indigenous faith and it made steady progress»³. In South India from early times of the current era up to the arrival of the Portuguese in the XVIth century, Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Christians, Jews and later Muslims lived in peace and harmony, effecting a cultural symbiosis and developing a philosophy of religious tolerance⁴.

Christianity came to India as early as the first century AD. According to this view Apostle Thomas, one of the 12 disciples of Jesus Christ, landed in Kodungalloor port in 52 AD. The Saint Thomas Christians (the Syrian Christians of Kerala), trace the origin of their church to the Apostle Thomas. The traditions and lore of Syrian Christians are rich in legends about the advent of the Apostle Thomas, his work, conversion of Brahmins⁵ and his martyrdom at Mylapore (Madras). The tradition of the Syrian Christians of Kerala is a living tradition⁶, represented in the memories and lives of people who identify themselves as the Christians of Thomas. By the oral tradition/history, which is a living tradition, Thomas came to Kodungalloor, founded seven church communities, namely, Kodungalloor (Cranganore), Palayur, Kottakkavu (Parur), Kokkamangalam, Niranam, Kollam (Quilon), and Chayal (Nilakkal).

The Saint Thomas Christians were sustained by the Churches of the Middle East, and the liturgical language was Syriac, and hence they got the appellation the «Syrian Christians». Let us remind ourselves that Christianity had its origin in Asia, and Syrian (or Syriac) Christianity is Asiatic, and the Syriac Liturgy is more ancient than the other two types of Christianity, namely Greek and Latin (Roman). In its traditions, Church life, and ways of thinking, the Syrian Christianity «is closer to the biblical world and more akin to Asiatic mentality»⁷.

¹ Podipara P. The social and Socio-Ecclesiastical Customs of Syrian Christians of India // Eastern Churches Quarterly. Vol. 7. London, 1947. P. 222–236.

² Windstedt E. O. The Christian Topography of Cosmos Indicopleustes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906. P. 321, 332, 344, 346.

³ Sreedhara Menon A. R. Cultural Heritage of Kerala: An Introduction. Ernakulam: Cochin Government Press, 1978. P. 17.

⁴ Mundadan A. M. History of Christianity in India. Vol. I: From the Beginning Up To The Middle of 16th Century. Bangalore: Theological publications in India, 1984. P. 154–156.

⁵ Visvanathan S. Op. cit. P. VIII.

⁶ Tisserant E. Eastern Christianity in India: A History of Syro-Malabar Church from the Earliest Time to the Present Day. London: Longmans, 1957. P. 1–10.

⁷ Chediath G. The Syriac Churches in Dialogue // Christian Orient. No XXVI (1), 2005. P. 21.

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SAINT THOMAS CHRISTIANS OF INDIA: A PARADIGM OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE EASTERN CHRISTIANITY

In the present study we focus on the ancient Syrian Christians of Kerala as a case study and try to unravel the fact that the Saint Thomas Christians of India is a paradigm of cultural identity in the Eastern Christianity which has been a reality in India right from the beginning of Christianity. I have used the terms «Saint Thomas Christians» and «Syrian Christians of Kerala / India» interchangeably as they are the same.

The Syrian Christianity in India existed within the encompassing framework of a dominant regional culture. It is my contention that the Hindus and the Syrian Christians of Kerala shared a «world» in common. «The features of their social life make the Syrian Christians recognizable as a unique cultural group in the comparative analyses of Christian communities in the world»⁶. Their life style is described as

⁶ Visvanathan S. The Christians of Kerala. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999. P. 1.

The Christian tradition which used the Syriac language is Syrian Church and the main centres of the Syrian Churches were Antioch on the Orontes, Edessa in the Euphrates-Tigris valley and Kodungalloor (Cranganore) in Kerala. The Church of the Thomas Christians could maintain its unity for sixteen centuries. In 1599 the Portuguese imposed a Latin hierarchy over them. The arrival of the Portuguese missionaries at the beginning of the 16th century opened a new chapter in the history of the Church of St. Thomas or the Syrian Christianity in India. The initial friendly relationship between the missionaries and the native Christians gradually changed into a contrast and collision of cultures, ecclesiastical traditions, theological visions and canonical institutions. The Syrian Christians were reduced to a simple suffragan to the Archdiocese of Goa and brought under Portuguese patronage by the Synod of Diamper (Udayamperur) in 1599. The conflict culminated in the so-called «Koonan Krsu Satyam» (or Coonan Cross Oath) in January 1653, and the subsequent divisions among the Thomas Christians or Kerala¹. Now they exist as into different Christian communities: Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, Malankara Catholic Church, Syrian Jacobite Church, Syrian Orthodox Church, Marthoma Church, Nestorian Church or the Church of the East, Thozhiyur Independent Church, Anglican Church, etc². Today the numbers Syrian Christians of India are: Syro-Malabar Catholic Christians – 3,753,000, Malankara Marthoma Christians – 700,000, Malankara Catholic Christians – 405,000, Malankara Orthodox Christians – 100,000, Malankara Jacobite Christians – 100,000, Church of the East Christians – 15,000, and Thozhiyur Independent Church Christians – 5, 000³. Thus, they number some 5,1 million all over the world.

2. The *Thoma Mārgam*: A Paradigm of Cultural Identity

The «Thoma Mārga» is also known as the «Law of Thomas»⁴, signifying the entire cultural identity, ethics, discipline, theology, spirituality and liturgy of the Syrian Christians of Kerala which they attribute to St. Thomas the Apostle. It constitutes the whole identity of the Syrian Christians or the Christian way of life. It must be added here that the term *mārga* in *Thoma Mārga* has come from the Pāli word *magga*, as the Syrian Christians had ethical and cultural interaction between Buddhists and them, for Buddhism and Jainism were prevalent in the early centuries in South India. It is important to note here that for the Syrian Christians of India, Christianity was not just a set of doctrines, concepts or dogmas, but a way of life or *mārga* to reach God the Father which St Thomas the Apostle introduced in India (*Thoma Mārgam*). The Thoma

Mārgam was the *complexus* of the rite of the Syrian Christians, the sum total of their liturgical, ascetical, ecclesiastical, social and political life.

The Thomas Christian community was highly ascetical. More than half of the days in a year were set apart for fast. The days of fast were the days of abstinence from eating non-vegetarian food, and even milk and milk products, chewing betel (eating pan) and sexual unions (in marital life). Wednesdays and Fridays of the whole year were also the days of abstinence. These days of fasting were devoted to prayer, alms-giving, and renunciation. «The austerity, the rigor and the strictness of the Thomas Christian community were something that the Western missionaries could neither grasp nor practice»¹. In short, it was the sum and substance of their ethical and spiritual life.

Before the XVIth century AD the bishops of the Syrian Christians were like the sages of India, preferred to live as spiritual men spending their life in prayer, meditation, fasting, study, and other ascetic practices. They never used to interfere and intervene in the administration of the temporal affairs of the Church, which was under the domain of the *Palli-yogams* (Palli-yogam is the democratic administrative structure of the Thomas Christians, and we will deal with it later) in the respective levels. The Palli-yogams acquired and alienated property and the other temporal matters were with them. «In brief, the bishops of the St. Thomas Christians, who were chiefly occupied with the *munus sanctificanti*, the celebration of the Holy Mysteries, were spiritual heads, without much interest in the governance and administration of the Church»². The Syrian Christians did, for the administrative practices were mostly based on customs and conventions and there were hardly any written rules and regulations.

3. Democracy, Self-Government and Administration of Justice: The *Palli-yogams*

The Thomas Christians developed an administrative system which was a harmonious blending of the local traditions with that of their individual Christianity. In the life of the Thomas Christians the Palli-yogams played a very important role. *Palli* means «the Church community», and *yogam* means «assembly» or «general body». A yogam consists of representatives of the families and the clergyman of the parish (local church community). This is something unique among the Syrian Christians of India. According to X. Koodapuzha, one of the renowned authorities on the Syrian Christians of Kerala, the assembly (Palli-yogam) seems to owe its origin to the ancient village assembly which was prevalent among the Dravidians³. The Dravidians of the *Sangha-kālam* (I–V centuries AD) used to gather together to discuss matters of common interest and take decision of them⁴. The leaders of the families were mem-

¹ For details see: *Pallath P.* The Catholic Church of India. Rome, 2003. P. 3–100, as quoted by *Vellanickal M.* The Syro-Malabar Church as an Individual Church // Christian Orient. No XXVI (1), 2005. P. 136.

² *Koodapuzha X.* The Indian Church of the Thomas Christians // Christian Orient. No I (1), 1980. P. 20–61.

³ Statistics given by *Chediath G.* Loc. cit. P. 22–23.

⁴ A detailed study on this, see: *Pathikulangara V.* The Law of Thomas: History, Liturgy and Theology of the Community of Thomas Christians. (Licentiate Thesis). Rome: PIL, 1974.

¹ *Vadakil M. S.* Syro-Malabar Church: Its Pastoral and Missionary Rights and Obligations as *Sui Iuris* Church // Syro-Malabar Church since the Eastern Code / Ed. by F. Eluvathingal. Trichur: Marymatha Publications, 2003. P. 25.

² *Pallath P.* Some Aspects of the Progressive Theology of the Church of St. Thomas Christians Before Its Westernization // Journal of St. Thomas Christians. Vol. 13 (4) & Vol. 14 (1), 2003. P. 71.

³ *Koodapuzha X.* Loc. cit. P. 32.

⁴ *Sreedhara Menon A. R.* The History of Kerala (Malayalam). Kottayam, 1969. P. 91–119.

bers of the *Mantam*. In the same way Palli-yogams acted in the form of democracy and self-government. The members of the Palli-yogam, as that of the *Mantam*, enjoyed perfect equality and it was an effective means to maintain communion and solidarity in the community. Even today among the Thomas Christians, wherever they are, these sorts of Palli-yogams play a vital role in administering the church communities.

The above mentioned Palli-yogam is a form of «Christian Republic». In the village Christian community, called as an *Idavaka* (parishes), the Syrian Christians dealt with all the ecclesiastical affairs in their Church assembly, namely the Palli-yogam. The Palli-yogams looked after the whole Christian life of the community and temporal affairs of the Church. They had power even to inflict punishments up to excommunication. It judged all the cases and settled differences. In serious cases, a regional yogam called *Deśya-yogam* with representatives from different village-parish communities was constituted for the administration of Justice. The Church General Assembly which was called *Mahā-yogam*, *Sabhā-yogam*, *Pothu-yogam*, *Samudāya-yogam*, or *Malankara-Idavaka-yogam*, with representatives from all the village-parish communities under the leadership the head of the Christian community called the *Arkadiakon* (or Archdeacon) decided the matters common to the Syrian Christians in general. This General Assembly was the supreme authority of the Indian Church of St. Thomas, and it enjoyed legislative, judicial and administrative powers over the whole Church.

The Palli-yogams had a vital say in the matters of ordaining a priest from among them. Priests were ordained for each parish community according to its need, with the consent of the Palli-yogam. It is remarkable that the Palli-yogam was not a body independent of the priests. Whether it was in the local yogam, regional yogam or in the yogam of the whole Church, the priests were given an important place. The fundamental reason for this is that the Church is considered to be one body, not as parallel bodies with laymen on one side and the clergy on the other. It is remarkable to note that before XVIth century AD, no important decision concerning the Church of the Syrian Christians could have been taken without the involvement and consent of the Palli-yogam, the supreme authority of this church. The Syrian Christians, like any other society, had been administering justice through the medium of the above-said Palli-yogams.

4. Cultural and Ritual Indian-ness

The Saint Thomas Christians of Kerala had the same cultural traits as that of their fellow Hindus till XVIth century, for they were from the same stock and race. It was one of the most remarkable traits of the Syrian Christians that even while they remained Christian in faith, they retained typical Hindu social customs. The Hindu dietary and dressing habits, socio-religious ceremonies, and art and architecture rules were all observed with just slight variations. The Syrian Christians also practised ritual related to birth, *vidyārambha* (initiation to learning), *vivāha* (marriage), and death¹.

Customs connected with pregnancy and child-birth were exactly that of the upper caste Hindus. When a young woman was about to become a mother, that is usu-

ally in the seventh month of pregnancy, she was taken to her parental home, where she would remain for three, five or even seven months, after the delivery. The new born baby was bathed in tepid water and was fed with drops of honey in which gold has been rubbed. The women attending on her were considered unclean, and became purified after a dip-bath in a pond, a stream or a river. The mother was said to be unclean for fifteen days after which she was purified by a ritual bath. The naming ceremony of the new-born child was known as *Mānmodīsa* in Syriac and its Malayalam translation was *Jñāna-snānam* meaning «bath to attain wisdom». It used to take place either on the seventh day or fourteenth day of the birth. In the naming of the newly born child at baptism, the paternal grandfather's or grandmother's name was given respectively to the first male or female child. The second child acquired the name of the maternal grandfather or grandmother.

There used to be the custom of the first feeding of child with rice as practiced by the Hindus (*Annprasam* or *Chorūṇu*). It used to take place in the sixth month after birth. When the child was about four years of age, *vidyārambham* (initiation to learning) took place. The Āśān (teacher) of the village or community was invited, and a brass vessel full of rice was taken to him. A lamp being lit, the teacher holds the right hand of the child and makes him write a letter or two on the rice, which along with a few *chakrams* (coins of money) and *pān* were presented to him.

Marriage was an elaborate ceremony among the Syrian Christians. There was no wedding ring and the *Tāli* had taken the place of wedding rings. They followed the Brahmin custom of dowry, given by the party of the bride to the bridegroom. Marriages usually took place on Sundays and the celebrations would last for four days. *Kalamezhal* (or a decorative design made with rice flour in the pavilion erected in front of the house), *Antamchārth* (the ceremonial dressing of the bridegrooms hair), ceremonial bath, *Mailānchiyidal* (feet of the bride used to be anointed with henna), *Madhuram-vekkal* (feeding the bride and bridegroom with sweet), etc. were part of the marriage ceremony among the Syrian Christians and even today these customs are kept up. The most important function within the marriage was the tying the knot of the *Tāli* or *Minnu* (a cross with 21 minute beads around more or less in the shape of a heart) at the neck of the bride by the bridegroom, and the thread of which is drawn out from the *Mantra-kodī* or the bridal veil. The tying of *Tāli* and the subsequent covering of the head of the bride by the bridegroom with the bridal veil all resembled the Hindu custom, with slight Christian modification. The *Tāli* which is the marriage badge should not be removed as long as a woman remains a wife, and should be given to the church after her husband's death, a practice observed from time immemorial till today. Marriage procession used to proceed on elephant's backs or in palanquins with the five traditional types of music and with the loud hooting of joy which is still known as *Kurava* in Kerala. After the religious ceremonies in the church, the bride and the groom were taken home in procession, and at their arrival they were welcomed with the sprinkling of *nellum nīrum* (paddy and water) – a fertility-cum-coronation rite and with lighted lamps, another sign of nobility-practice. Special attention was paid that the couple entered the house with their right feet.

¹ *Vadakel M. S.* Loc. cit. P. 24.

Death pollution, vegetarianism during mourning periods, ceremonial bathing to remove death pollution (*pulakuli*), funeral rites followed by feasting (*aḍḍyantram*), death anniversary feeding (*Śrāddham* or *Chātham*) all were part of the culture. After the death of an aged person, the members of the family observe *pula* or pollution, usually for 11 days, or even 13 days, after which there is a vegetarian feast and prayers are offered for the repose of the soul. This ceremonial observance is known as *Pulavīdal* till today. Further, taboos relating to menstrual pollution were followed strictly by women.

The Churches externally looked like non-Christian pagodas, except the Cross put on top of the roof. Church architecture of the Syrian Christians for the first sixteen centuries in India, before the advent of the Portuguese missionaries, resembled the Hindu architecture. Though in their internal structure, the churches resembled Jewish synagogue, the construction of the churches took place in manner prescribed by Hindu *Thachu Śāstram*, (architectural prescriptions) and the rules followed were adapted from the building principles for the Hindu temples. Perhaps the most popular functions among the Syrian Christians had been and still are, like in the Hindu temples, the feasts and festivals of the local parish church. In the Syrian churches, right down today, music used to start several days in advance of the festivity, and processions with parasols, trumpets, *cheṇḍa-melam*, and elephants were taken through the main streets. After analyzing the different devotional and religious practices of the Syrian Christians, A. R. Sreedhara Menon says, «Thus a sample analysis of the *Nerchas* (food offerings) in the churches shows their variety and their resemblance to the *Vazhipadus* offered by Hindus in their temples in some respects»¹.

The bread used for *Qurbana* (Holy Eucharist) was baked by the deacons by chanting psalms and the bread was brought to the celebrant in the place of worship on a fresh leaf, preferably lotus leaf². This practice has resemblance with the Hindu practice of *naivedya* or food offerings to the gods. According to Hindu Dharmaśāstras offerings should be made in a vessel either of gold, silver, bronze, copper or clay, or on *palāśa* leaves or lotus leaf³. Another interaction of *mores* was the social amusement particularly that of the national dance, called *Māragam Kali* and *Paricha-muttu Kali*. In both these social functions, an old-fashioned brass lamp was placed on the floor, and the dancers wearing peacock feathers on their head, usually 12 in number, used to go around the same, with measured steps singing religious songs on St Thomas, the Apostle and Mother Mary. «They remind one of the *Yathra Kali Pattu* of the Brahmins»⁴. Some of those songs now used are rather modernized versions of the ancient ones.

5. Summing up

The saint Thomas Christians of India adopted those socio-cultural customs of their milieu. The names, surnames, lifestyle, architecture of the houses and churches, the manner of church-administration, church and religious festivities, attire and the insignia of the clergy, educational system, clerical formation, family life, dress and ornaments of the Christians and their dietary were so Indian. Thus, one can find the categories of time, space and the body articulated in social use represent the world held in common by the Thomas Christians and Hindus of Kerala. Today the Saint Thomas Christians still keep up their cultural identity in India, in all facets of their religious life. They shine like a beautiful paradigm of cultural identity and individuality in the Christian orient.

¹ Sreedhara Menon A. R. Cultural Heritage of Kerala: An Introduction. Cochin, 1978. P. 57.

² Placid. Nammude Rithu (Malayalam). Mannanam: K. E. Press, 1944. P. 34-35.

³ Kane P. V. History of Dharmaśāstra. In 6 vols. Vol. II. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, 1974. P. 733.

⁴ Job K. E. The Syrian Christians of Malabar. Changanacherry: St Joseph's Orphanage Press, 1938. Part IV.