



SYRIAN CHRISTIANS IN KERALA - A HISTORICAL APPRAISAL

*Joseph K. Lazar**

Since the dawn of the sixteenth century, the society, economy and culture of the Afro-Asian and Latin American countries had been greatly affected by the colonial power. The extent of the transformation affected through the interaction between the western and the eastern worlds can be perceived in its fullness against the backdrop of the conversion of the so called "first world countries" into the "third world countries" and vice-versa through the "strenuous efforts" made by the those committed to the "missio civiliatrix" or "civilizing mission" or by those who happily carried the "Whiteman's burden" on their shoulders. The "development of underdevelopment" in these countries, initiated by the European powers, was chiefly responsible for such a turn of events. The barbaric and atrocious fights put up by the present "first world countries" to obtain a foothold in the Afro-Asian and Latin American countries bear out the fact that they crossed swords on the high seas not for a share in the misery of the "third world" countries and to lighten the burden, but for a lion's share in the wealth and prosperity of the countries that were considered to be forming part of the "first world" at that time.

Cultures, communities and modes of worship fell a prey to the onslaught of the colonizing powers, which, in their eagerness to establish their sway in all the realms of life, crushed several institutions that did not conform to their monolithic culture. They smothered several active forms of culture in these countries and did not pay any head to the fact that unity was different from uniformity and that unity could

**Lecturer in Political Science, Nirmalagiri College, Nirmalagiri P.O., Kannur Dt., Kerala 670 701*

survive in diversity. The Syrian Christian community, the seed of which was sown as early as the first after Christ by St. Thomas, the apostle, flourished in the Indian social milieu against several odds for centuries together keeping its individuality intact. It was closely connected with the Syrian Church or Chaldean Church as far as liturgy and liturgical language were concerned. But it grew up in Malabar, evincing the characteristic features of an Indian institution. A particular church of this name was not spared by the colonizers who went on trying to dominate it against constant resistance on the part of the local people and even against the recommendations of the Pope, the Supreme Pontiff. Some of the bishops, sent from the Catholic hierarchies in the Middle East for the Church in Malabar, were kept behind bars for their unwillingness to be subservient to the colonizing powers. But the unquenchable desire to remain independent could not be totally wiped out through the colonial domination that lasted for a couple of centuries.

In the wake of decolonization, the voice for restoring the Syrian Christian church and the Christian community to its pristine purity reverberated at various levels. The decrees promulgated by the Ecumenical Council of Vatican II insisted on unity in diversity, independence and equal dignity of the oriental churches in general and of individual church in particular. The guidelines and recommendations furnished by the conciliar degrees were interpreted succinctly, elucidated and clarified by one of the participants of the Council, an Indian sage, who witnessed the ravages of colonialism and imperialism in India. It was none other than the 'light from the Orient,' His Eminence Cardinal Simon Lourdasamy, who worked as the Cardinal Perfect of the Oriental churches from 30 October 1985. His clarifications of, and the conclusions from, the Conciliar decrees, given vent to at the Synod of Bishops on 28 November 1985 found expression in the historic letter of Pope John Paul II written to the bishops of India on 28 May 1987.

The vicissitudes of the Syrian Christian Church in her history forms an important chapter in the history of the Syrian Catholic Church in general. We shall address ourselves to throw light on the emergence of this community covering its origin, development and struggles against the colonial powers to maintain its individuality and finally its attempts to restore its originality in the post-colonial period.

The history of the past can be reconstructed from several sources, such as the existence of a particular Christian community, a living tradition, archaeological evidences, numismatic facts, parallel evidence corroborating a living tradition, and literary sources, besides, of course, written histories. Fully conscious of the validity of the plurality of sources, Pope John Paul II, after his historic visit to various part of India, wrote in the subsequent year.

Since very ancient times, a considerable community of Christians known as the St. Thomas Christians has existed in Southern India. Indeed there is a very strong tradition that St. Thomas himself visited and laboured in India, both in the extreme south and in what is known today as Madras-Mylapore area. There is even a tomb in Mylapore, which is venerated as his resting place. Later on at various times, the Church in India was strengthened by other groups of Christians from the Middle East who became assimilated into the Church already there.²

According to the ancient tradition corroborated by the existence of a community called St. Thomas Christians, literary evidence of the last quarter of the second century³ and archaeological sources, St. Thomas, the Apostle preached the Gospel in India when the Parthian King Guduphara, or Gundaphares ruled Afghanistan and Punjab in the first century A.D. The name of the ruler is historical and it has been found on coins and on an inscription in Gandhara.⁴ The *veeradian pattu*, the song of Robban Thomas and the *Margamkali pattu* point to the South Indian Apostolate of St. Thomas.⁵ It is argued by Cardinal Tisserant that Acts of Judas-Thomas written in Mesopotamia support the general conviction of the contemporaries in the second century in Mesopotamia that the Apostolate of St. Thomas was in South India. Similarly Eusebius writes about Alexandrine Pantenus who found Christians in India reading the Gospel of St. Mathew probably in Aramaic or Syriac at the end of the second century.⁶

The Fathers of the Church like St. Ephrem, St. Gregory Nazianzus, St. Ambrose, Gaudentius, St. Jerome, Paulinus of Nola, Ecclesiastical calendars, and martyrologies relate St. Thomas with India.⁷ St. Ephrem (+373) testifies that the body of St. Thomas was shifted from India to Edessa. An ancient Syrian Calendar has reference to 3 July as the day on which a lance in India pierced through St. Thomas and that a certain merchant called Khaban took his body to Edessa. The Divine Office of the East Syrians influenced by the Acts of Judas Thomas often refers to India as the field of activity of St. Thomas, who according to the same office, died in India. These East Syrians believed that the moral remains of St. Thomas were taken from India to Edessa. Adai and Mari who preached the Gospel to the East Syrians, were the disciples of St. Thomas and so they had great devotion to the Apostle. *Chronicum Edessenum* (XXXVIII) makes mention of the solemn deposit of the relics of St. Thomas in the Church dedicated to the Apostle in Edessa in A.D. 393 or in 705 of the Greek Era.⁸

The fact that St. Thomas, the Apostle preached the Gospel and converted a number of Indians to Christianity is testified by several writers like Marco Polo, the Venetian who visited the tomb of St. Thomas at Mylapore in 1295. He speaks of the large number of pilgrims coming to the tomb at Mylapore.⁹ Similarly Blessed Odorick,

the Italian Franciscan wrote in 1324 about the holy remains of St. Thomas, the Apostle in Malabar and of a Church of St. Thomas.¹⁰ Marignoli, the Papal delegate to China in 1394 refers to the Church of St. Thomas and the province of India.¹¹ Nicholas de Conti, an Italian merchant (1425-1430), makes mention of the 'Malepor', the tomb of St. Thomas and the church of St. Thomas.¹²

The Portuguese, on their arrival, were informed of the tomb of St. Thomas at Mylapore and they conducted serious researches about St. Thomas and the tomb. They were convinced of the St. Thomas Apostolate in South India. They issued coins in the name of the Apostle, built a ship to his name and held firm to the tradition.¹³

The bricks of the tomb of St. Thomas at Mylapore measuring 15 x 8" and 2.9" thick are of the same period as those found in Arikamedu in the vicinity of Pondicherry about 150 kilometers south of Mylapore which flourished as a Roman settlement from the first Century B.C to the third Century A.D. This archaeological evidence about the tomb of St. Thomas, just as the tomb of St. Peter under the St. Peter's Basilica, is a solid proof for the origin of the St. Thomas Christians and their connections with St. Thomas, the apostle. There are no rival traditions nor rival tomb nor rival St. Thomas Christians in the world over.¹⁴

A few persecutions on the Coromandel Coast drove the Christians to Thiruvancode. The seduction attributed to a Hindu conjuror Manikavachakar made a number of Christians give up Christian faith and embrace Hinduism. Some of those who wanted to remain in the Catholic faith fled to places like Quilon on the Malabar Coast.¹⁵ The Hindu revival movement coupled with Mohammedan inroads into the South also could be instrumental in destroying Christianity in the Coromandel region especially around San Thome-Mylapore. But the tomb continued to be there.

It is quite natural that the European missionaries who came to India to preach the Gospel of Christ and convert people to Christianity wanted to show that they got Christian faith earlier than the people of the country, which they were trying to convert. Consequently for a long time these missionaries and their converts were not willing to accept the evidences regarding the south Indian apostolate of St. Thomas. Now, on account of the availability of various sources confirming the fact of the origin of St. Thomas Christians especially in the light of the scientific studies conducted by A.E. Medlycott¹⁶ and a good number of others, the doubt about the origin of the St. Thomas Christians is satisfactorily cleared. The Euro-centric considerations of the missionaries and their converts are now left without any support and they are bound to accept the historical facts. Even those who used to raise doubt whether India was known to outsiders in the early centuries of Christianity

came to know about the contacts of Rome with India through West Asia even before the dawn of Christian era such as the commercial contacts with Korkai, Arikamedu, Dharnikotta, Nagarjunakonda, Cranganore, Broach and so on. Kaveri Poompattinam or Poompuhar and even a separate section of the town occupied by the foreigners.

Some of the important families in Kerala, such as Pakalomattam, Sankarapuri, Kalli, Kalikavu, Koyakkam, Madeipur, Muttodal, Nedumpally, Panakkamattam and Kottakkali were held in great esteem by the Syrian Christians, since priesthood and prelacy for several centuries were confined to these families. Some of these Syrian Christian families trace their origin to those converted by St. Thomas.

New groups of Christian that came to Kerala at different times after the arrival of St. Thomas were added to the members of the Syrian Christians. Approximately 400 Syrian migrants under Thomas of Cana, a merchant of Jerusalem, including bishops, priests and deacons came to India in A.D. 345.¹⁷ There were two more migrations of Christians from Syria in A.D. 825 under a certain bishop called Thomas Cana¹⁸ and later under two bishops, Mar Sabarisho and Mar Peroz, who settled down in Quilon confirming the local Christians in their faith.¹⁹ Thus the community of Syrian Christians that existed at the time of the arrival of the Portuguese consisted of the St. Thomas Christians.

They followed the East Syrian language and liturgy and so they were called otherwise Syro-Malabar Christians who were liturgically connected with the East Syrian rite and had an independent existence in Kerala on account of the local traditions and practices kept intact by them. The Church is generally known as Syro-Malabar Church, distinguishing it from the Syro-Malankara church which follows West Syrian language and liturgy and came into existence from the section of the followers of those who were converted to Christianity by St. Thomas and who left the Syrian Catholic faith in 1653 after the oath of Koonankurisu.

It could be defined as the "community of Christians in India some of whom trace back their origin in faith to St. Thomas, the apostle, and others to Thomas of Cana or to other Syrian Christian immigrants and who were once hierarchically connected with the Chaldean Church of Mesopotamia and Persia.²⁰ Hence the Syro-Malabar Church as it exists at present comprises two different sections known as the Nordhists and the Sudhists (Vadakkumbhagar and the Thekkumbhagar), the former claiming their ancestry to those brought to faith in Jesus Christ by St. Thomas, the apostle in the first century after Christ and the latter to the migrants in the fourth century.

The Indian Christians of St. Thomas came into close association with Edessa in middle east, certainly before the end of the second century as is evident from the

composition of the Acts of Thomas.²¹ The East Syrian rite had its origin in Edessa and developed in the Seleucian Church, together with the development of that Church. Seleucian Church had always the East Syrian liturgy and this was bequeathed to the Christians in India. The Syrian Christians of Kerala were connected with the Church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, now represented by the Syrian Catholic Chaldean and the dissident Nestorian churches. The name Seleucia-Ctesiphon took its origin from the twin cities of Seleucia and Ctesiphon situated on either side of river Tigris. This Church is also known by two other names, namely, the Church of the East and the Babylonian Church, because it flourished in the Persian (Sassanian) empire.²² A certain bishop, David was reported in Chronicle of Seert to be leaving the See of Bassorah in A.D. 295 to take up missionary activities in India.²³

The Syro-Malabar Church of the Syrian Christian community in India was directly under the jurisdiction of the Persian Ecclesiastical Provinces. Therefore, we find a certain John 'the Persian Bishop of all Persia and greater India' as a signatory of the decrees of the first Ecumenical Council of Nicea²⁴ in A.D. 325. The Bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon tried to bring the bishops of Persia under his jurisdiction in the fourth century. With the approval of the Western Fathers Seleucia was created as a Metropolitan See and all the bishops who resisted the attempts of the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon submitted themselves to Mar Issac at the Synod he convened in A.D. 410. He was thus recognized as the head of all the bishops of the country. Mar Dadjesus proclaimed in A.D. 424 at the Synod his own independence from the Patriarch of Antioch. Thus the Catholicos of Seleucia began to be called Patriarch.²⁵ The Seleucian Church that had broken away from the Patriarch of Antioch favoured Nestorian views. But there were many bishops in Persia and Seleucia who depended on the Syrian Catholic Antiochian See. Even when the Seleucia Church brought the Church of Persia under its jurisdiction, the latter continued to exercise its right to send bishops to India. Cosmas Indicopleustes during his travels between 520 and 525 came across Christians in Socotra and in Ceylon who were under the Persian clergy. He also makes mention of Christians in Quilon and Male, the last being interpreted as Malabar Coast.²⁶ Isho. Yahb, the Patriarch of Seleucia (650-660), in his correspondence with Simeon, the Metropolitan of Riwardashir in Persia made mention of his right.²⁷ In the face of resistance from the Persian bishops, who used to send bishops to India, the Seleucian Patriarch Saliba-Za-Kha (714-728) raised the Church of India to the dignity of a Metropolitan See.

Patriarch Timothy I of Seleucia (780-823) speaks about many Persian monks who voyaged across the seas towards India and China. Later he constituted the Church of India independent of the Metropolitan of Persia and gave it a metropolitan of its

own. During this period the usage of the term 'Christians of St. Thomas' indicating the Christians of Malabar came into existence for the first time.²⁸ The East Syrian patriarch of Mesopotamia used to send bishops regularly to Kerala. The Church of Malabar on account of which it had a separate identity and differed from the churches in Persia and Mesopotamia also practised Christianized Hindu customs.²⁹

There is no evidence to show that the Bishops sent from Persia to India were from the Nestorian Church in Persia. It is possible that bishops were sent from the Syrian Catholic See of Antioch as well as Seleucia during the period from 800 to 1200.³⁰ The Antiochian Church fell into the Greek Schism in the eleventh century and the Mongolians destroyed the Persian Church in the thirteenth century. Hence, from the thirteenth century Seleucia Church alone had the jurisdiction over the Church in India and especially Malabar. Patriarch Jaballa III of Seleucia (1281-1317) had an Indian Metropolitan under him.³¹

Mar John made Cranganore the centre of his metropolitan See in 1129.³² The dependence of the Church of Malabar on Seleucian Church for jurisdiction is clear from the Syriac manuscript written in 1301 at Cranganore by Mar Jacob, the Metropolitan Bishop of the See of Divus Thomas and all the Church of Christians in India. This manuscript is preserved in the Vatican Library. Mar Jabbalaha was the Patriarch of all the oriental churches when this manuscript was written.³³

A letter written by the bishops of Malabar to the Patriarch of Baghdad in 1504 speaks of the consecration of two monks from the coenobium of St. Eugenius under the name of Mar Thomas and Mar John at the request made by three illustrious men from India who came to the Patriarch in 1490. This was done during the patriarchate of Mar Simon. After a year Mar Thomas went from India to the Patriarch and reported about the Malabar Christians and Mar John continued to be in Malabar. Mar Thomas came back to Malabar in 1503 along with three other bishops consecrated by Mar Elias, the Patriarch of that time. These three bishops were Mar Jabbalaha, Mar Denha and Mar Jacob.³⁴ Thus there were five bishops in Malabar in 1503. Of them Mar Jacob alone lived until 1552 looking after the administration of the Church in Malabar. St. Francis Xavier was a great friend and admirer of Mar Jacob and so he wrote to the king of Portugal for Mar Jacob about the way in which the bishop was maltreated and misunderstood by the Portuguese in Malabar.³⁵ The report of St. Francis Xavier is a clear indication that Mar. Jacob followed the catholic faith in Malabar was not a Nestorian.

The relation with the Church of Persia lasted till the end of the sixteenth century when the Syro-Malabar Church and the Syrian Christian community was brought under the Portuguese Padroado after Mar Abraham (1568-97).

The Portuguese, who were interested in firmly establishing their Padroado rights over the church of Malabar, found the presence of Chaldean bishops a great hindrance. So they took all measures not to allow any more Chaldean bishops to come to Malabar after the death of Mar Jacob. As a result, Mar Joseph, the brother of John Sulaka, the Chaldean Patriarch who made his profession of faith before Pope Julius III, was detained in Portuguese Bassein in 1556.³⁶ This proves that the chief factor that played an important role in the conflict between the Portuguese and the Syro-Malabar Church was not concerned with matters of faith but with the eagerness to assert the rights of Padroado. One could recall the constant fights picked up by the Portuguese with the Congregation of the Propagation of faith in a later period. The existence of two churches, one belonging to the Padroado and the other belonging to the Propaganda Fide, both of which were under the Latin Church, on the eastern coast of India can substantiate this view. Moreover, the lack of familiarity with a Church other than the Latin Church coupled with the inordinate passion to keep off the influence of protestant Reformation striking roots in Europe in the first half of the sixteenth century must also have prompted them to assume a hostile attitude towards the Syro-Malabar Church and its bishops who keep different traditions, customs and manners. The Portuguese claimed that they had jurisdiction over the Syro-Malabar Church and so they retained Mar Joseph and the two Dominicans for eighteen months in Bassein.

When the Portuguese found that Mar Joseph was properly trained in Latin practices, they sent him to Malabar. But on reaching Malabar he turned out to be totally against the Latinizing spirit of the Portuguese and refused to ordain clerics not instructed in Syriac language. On account of his opposition to the latinization initiated by the Portuguese, he was accused of Nestorian tendencies. He went to Rome and Portugal in 1557 where he explained his position. His innocence was proved and he was proposed to be a cardinal. This would not have been sensible if he had belonged to a heretic or schismatic Church. On the eve of his nomination, however, he died in 1569 in Rome.³⁷

In the meantime, the Chaldean Patriarch sent Mar Abraham to Malabar. He too was detained by the Portuguese and was deported to Portugal. But he escaped from the Portuguese on reaching Mozambique and went to his Patriarch who sent him to Pope with letters of recommendation. The Pope sent him back to Malabar recommending him to the Portuguese. The Portuguese detained him in prison in Goa from where he escaped and reached Malabar. Mar Abraham was given the title of Angamalee by the East Syrian Patriarch at the recommendation of the Pope.³⁸ The people of Malabar received him with great happiness.³⁹ He was also called 'The Gate of all India' and the superior of all the bishops and Archbishops of his rite. Like his colleague Mar Joseph, he too was accused of heresy. By an apostolic

Brief dated 27 December 1595 it was decided that the successor of Mar Abraham was to be nominated not by the East Syrian Patriarch, but by Rome directly.⁴⁰ Mar Abraham continued to look after the Church in Malabar till his death in 1597. He was asked by the Pope to attend the third Provincial Council of Goa in 1585 and he had to sign a number of decrees of the former councils too.

Based on the Brief of 27 December 1595 and another of 21 January 1597,⁴¹ Dom Menezes, the Portuguese Latin Archbishop of Goa, entered Malabar and exercised jurisdiction over the Malabar Church. Intent on reducing the Syro-Malabar Church to the Portuguese Padroado jurisdiction, he convoked the synod of Diamper in 1599. Archdeacon George, administrator of Angamalee and of the St. Thomas Christians, opposed this move. But the St. Thomas Christians were threatened with excommunication and were asked to condemn their legitimate head, the Patriarch of Babylon. The liturgical books of the Syrian were burned. Thus the Syro-Malabar church was brought under the jurisdiction of the Portuguese Padroado.⁴²

The bishops of Syro-Malabar Church had their headquarters at Cranganore from the fourth to the sixteenth century and in the sixteenth century it was shifted to Angamalee. After the death of Mar Abraham the Syrian Bishop, the Syrians were for the three centuries entrusted to the care of the Latin Bishops. Till 1597 they had their bishops from the Middle East. The last of the bishops of this generation was Mar Abraham who died in 1597.

Roz S.J., a Latin priest was nominated as the successor of Mar Abraham on 5 November 1599 to the Bishopric of Angamalee which was reduced by Menezes to a mere Diocese on 20 December 1599 as suffragan to the Portuguese Latin Diocese of Goa.⁴³ Thus the primatial See of the St. Thomas Christians was reduced to the status of a suffragan of Goa. The Padroado rights of the Portuguese king were extended to Angamalee on 4 August 1600. Latinization of the liturgy was initiated. Many of the existing items of liturgy were substituted by Syriac translation of the Latin liturgy. In view of the requests of the people and of Bishop Roz, Archbishopric of Angamalee was restored in 1608. But its title and headquarters were transferred to Cranganore. It remained under the Padroado though not as a suffragan of Goa. In 1610 when Roz was the Archbishop of Cranganore, ecclesiastical territory in India was divided among the Padroado prelates of Goa, Cranganore, Cochin and Mylapore⁴⁴ and the people of Syro-Malabar Church were divided between Cranganore and Cochin.

Though the Syrian Christians of Malabar, being obedient to the Pope, accepted the Latin prelate as their ecclesiastical superior, they did not cease from demanding a bishop of their own. This eagerness prompted them to welcome a certain Ahattalla,

an imposter as their bishop. As the Portuguese refused to release him at Cochin, the Syrian Christians of Malabar took an oath before the Coonan Cross at Mattancherry on 3 January 1653 refusing to obey the Portuguese Jesuits represented by the Archbishop Garcia SJ.⁴⁵ Those who took this oath met at Alengadu and witnessed the consecration of a pseudo-Bishop Thomas by twelve priests paving the way for a schism and the acceptance of Jacobitism with West Syrian liturgy.⁴⁶

Subsequent to the revolt of 1653, the Latin Propaganda jurisdiction was also introduced into Malabar. The Syrian Catholics, who remained loyal to the catholic faith even after the revolt of 1653, were thus divided between the Propaganda and Padroado jurisdictions. The propaganda prelates were called general Vicars Apostolic. From 1700 to 1787 all of them were foreign Latin Carmelites. Still the St. Thomas Christians continued to fight for their own independence from the Latin domination. There were some conflicts led by Bishop Gabriel in 1715, Bishop Pandari in 1799, Bishop Roccas in 1861 and by Bishop Mellus in 1874. Pandari was a native of Malabar consecrated in Mesopotamia while the others were Mesopotamians. Those who followed Mellus became Nestorians in 1908. Thus the Church in Malabar lost a number of Catholics to schismatic Church in its fight for the liberation from the Latin domination.

The Padroado jurisdiction over the Syro-Malabar Church was totally suppressed in 1886 and a ritual separation was made in the following year between the Syrian Catholics and Latins. The members of the Syro-Malabar Church were put under two vicariates. Latin Propaganda vicars apostolic who were not Carmelites as their predecessors. Thus in 1887 the vicariate apostolic of Kottayam and Trichur were created for the Syrian Catholics separating them from the Archdiocese of Cranganore and the vicariate apostolic of Verapoly. Archdiocese of Cranganore was abolished in 1887. The craving for independence continued and in 1896 these vicariates were reorganized. Three Propaganda vicariates were constituted under Trichur, Ernakulam and Changanacherry with prelates from the St. Thomas Catholics. Rt. Rev. Aloysius Pazheparambil was appointed the first vicar apostolic of Ernakulam in 1896. The Vicariate apostolic of Kottayam, exclusively for the Sudhists, was established in 1911. Msgr. Pazheparambil was succeeded by Mar Augustine Kandathil in 1919. The Syrian Catholics in Kerala were brought from the Propaganda to the Sacred Oriental Congregation in 1917 and the Malabar hierarchy was restored in 1923 with Ernakulam as the Metropolis and Changanacherry, Kottayam and Trichur as suffragans. Mar Augustine Kandathil was appointed the first Archbishop. In 1923 itself Kottayam diocese was erected exclusively for Sudhists. The diocese of Changanacherry was bifurcated in 1950 and Palai was created. Tellicherry diocese was created in 1953 for those who migrated to the Malabar regions from Travancore. Changanacherry was raised to Archbishopric in 1956

with Palai and Kottayam as suffragans. The Diocese of Kothamangalam was erected in 1956 for the Syrian Catholics formerly under Ernakulam. The diocese of Tellicherry was bifurcated and a new diocese by name Mananthawady was created in 1973 with Mar Jacob Thoonkuzhy as its first bishop. Similarly Diocese of Trichur was divided and the diocese of Palghat was erected as a new diocese in 1974. The diocese of Kanjirapally took its origin from the Archdiocese of Changanacherry in 1977 with Mar Joseph Powathil as its first bishop. As the Trichur diocese was still bigger, it was divided once again and the diocese of Irinjalakkuda came into being in 1978. A division of Tellicherry diocese was further done in 1986 and the new diocese of Thamarassery was established with Mar Sebastian Mankuzhikkary as its first bishop. A Major Archbishop in tune with the traditions of the Oriental Churches was created with the title of Angamalee and Ernakulam on 29 January 1993. Cardinal Padiyara was appointed as the first Major Archbishop. Dioceses of Trichur and Tellicherry were raised to the status of Archbishopric in 1995. Thus there is a major archbishopric with the archdiocese like Changanacherry, Ernakulam, Trichur and Tellicherry. The diocese of Thuckalay was erected in 1996 for those who once belonged to the Archdiocese of Changanacherry. Mar George Alancherry took charge as its first bishop. The churches under Tellicherry were brought under the newly created diocese of Belthangady in 1999 with Mar Lawrence Mukkuzhy as its first bishop. Idukki diocese was created in 2003 for those who inhabit chiefly the high ranges with Mar Mathew Anikuzhikattil as its first bishop. The number of Archdioceses increased with the creation of Kottayam as another Archdiocese in 2006.

The diocese of Kanjirapally, Palai and Thuckalay constitute the suffragan dioceses under the Archdiocese of Changanacherry while Irinjalakuda, Palghat come under the Archdiocese of Trichur. Dioceses of Kothamangalam and Idukki function as the suffragan dioceses of Ernakulam-Angamalee. Diocese of Belthangady, Mananthawady and Thamarassery work as the suffragan dioceses under the Archdiocese of Tellicherry. Kottayam Archdiocese has personal jurisdiction all over Kerala and abroad. Thus the ST. Thomas Christians or Syro-Malabar Catholics who trace their origin to the preaching to Apostle St. Thomas are spread in a number of Ecclesiastical province asserting their independence. Its march towards independence and the stupendous growth during the centuries remain constitute a great chapter in the history of Kerala in particular and of India in general. This community plays decisive role in the nation building and politics.

The Syrian Christian community is not only confined to Kerala. It has its branches in various parts of India with well-established ecclesiastical provinces that demonstrates the influence that can be wielded by the Syrian Christians of Kerala.

In the wake of independence from the English and the establishment of Indian republic, the mobility of Syrian Christian community from among the Syrian Christians of Kerala became easier. Their educational standard and the willingness to serve in any part of India and the exposure to other cultures are the added advantages for their mobility. Though there were missionaries, namely priests, brothers and sisters from the Syrian Christian community working in various parts of the British India under several religious congregations and dioceses administered by Latin hierarchy, they had to conform themselves to the Latin Church and Latin rite. They were bound to give their original rite and adopt a new rite in the missions in the past. The candidates trained for priesthood or life in the convents who left their native place and original rite at the tender age, were not taught sufficiently about the existence of other rites let alone their own Syro-Malabar rite of the Syrian Catholics even as part of their general formation and general knowledge. This sort of colonial mentality cherished by the Church in India with the tacit approval of the authorities in Rome prevented the Syro-Malabar Church of the Syrian Catholics from expanding its activities outside Kerala. The Universal Church realizing this mistake initiated the establishment of eparchies or ecclesiastical provinces outside Kerala to be administered by the Syrian Catholics of Kerala. Taking into account the role-played by the Syro-Malabar Church of the Syrian Catholics in the evangelization of India, the Holy See erected a Syro-Malabar diocese in 1962 in Chanda, in Maharashtra. Mar Vijayanand Nedumpuram has been the bishop from 1990.

The Holy See took serious measures to put into effect the ideas contained in number 4 of the Conciliar Degree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* that was brought out by Cardinal Lourdasamy at the Synod of the Bishops on 28 November 1985. The relevant portion reads, 'Let provision be made therefore all over the world for the safeguarding and growth of all the particular churches, and hence let parishes and own hierarchies be established where the spiritual good of the faithful demands'. With a view to doing reparation for the centuries of suppression of the Syro-Malabar Church, and to effect what is decided in the Second Vatican Council, the Holy See created a few exarchates for the activities of the Syro-Malabar church and entrusted them to the prelates of the Syro-Malabar church. Satna (1968), Bijnur (1972), Sagar (1977), Ujjain (1977), Rajkot (1977), Jgdalpur (1977), Gorakhpur (1984), Kalyan (1988), Adilabad (1999) are the dioceses outside Kerala administered by the prelates of the Syro-Malabar Church. This speaks volumes for the importance of the Syro-Malabar Christians in nation building.

Apart from the Syrian Catholic prelates working in the dioceses entirely created and administered by Syrian Catholics, there have been Syrian Catholic prelates working in dioceses run by the Latin Church outside Kerala. A few names may be noted here. Rt. Rev. Dr. Thomas Thiruthalis CM in Balasore Diocese, Archbishop Most

Rev. Dr. Raphael Chenath SVD in Cuttack-Bhuvaneswar, Rt. Rev. Dr. Thomas Katturkudi in Diphu, Mar Dominic Kokkatt CST in Gorakpur, Rev. Dr. Thomas Menamparambil SDB in Guwahati, Rt. Rev. Dr. Joseph Mittathany in Imphal, Rt. Rev. Dr. George Anathil SVD (Indore), Rt. Rev. Sr. Symphorian T. Keeprath OFC Cap. (Jullunder), Rt. Rev. Hippolitus Kunnunkal OFM (cap) in Jammu-Kashmir, Rt. Rev. Abraham Viruthukulangara in Khandwa, Rt. Rev. Dr. Joseph Mukhak, SDB in Kohima, Rt. Rev. Fr. Joseph Augustin Charanakkunel in Raipur, Rt. Rev. Dr. George Mamalassery in Tura, and Rt. Rev. Dr. Joseph Pathalil in Udaipur and so on.⁴⁷

A number of members from the Syrian Christian community in Kerala are scattered in various parts of the subcontinent on account of the positions occupied by them in the Republic of India. They, in the so-called 'Disapora' require pastoral care and that too within their own liturgy. Since the Universal Church is no more interested in the perpetuation of the colonial hegemony of the Latin Hierarchy and, on the contrary, is bound by the decision taken in the Councils and Synods, she makes provision for them. His Eminence Simon Cardinal Lourdasamy, the Prefect of the Oriental Congregation, declared in 1985 'Regarding the oriental faithful, especially in the 'diaspora' this congregation has not ceased insisting that Latin Bishops observe carefully the norms contained in number 23 of the Conciliar decree "christus Dominus" on the pastoral office of Bishops in the Church about the care of the faithful of different rites. Where there are faithful of other rites, the diocesan Bishop should provide for their spiritual needs, either through priests of parishes of the same rite, or through an Episcopal Vicar, given the necessary faculties and if the case demands even endowed with an Episcopal character.'⁴⁸

Several Archbishops and Bishops who made necessary arrangements for fostering the patrimony of the oriental Church understand the tenor of this passage. The Holy See has already erected oriental territories for different Churches like the territory for the Ukrainians in Argentina, for Matronites and Ukranians in Australia, for Maronites and Greek Melkite Catholics in Brazil, for Ukranians, Maronites, Greek Melchite Catholics and Slovaks in Canada, for Ukranians and Maronites, Greek Melchites Catholics, Ruthernians, Rumanians and Chaldeans in the United States. Apostolic Exarchates are created in Rome for Armenians.

Pope John Paul II of happy memory constituted a Commission under the chairmanship of Cardinal Secretary of the State, composed of the cardinal prefects of the two Roman Congregations directly concerned in this matter, the Apostolic Pro-Nuncio in India, Archbishops representing the three Rites in India and others. On 28 May 1987 the Pope in view of the recommendations of this commission, wrote to the Bishops of India, 'In this process of evangelization, there has always

existed a general collaboration on the part of priests, religious and laity baptized in the Syro-Malabar Church itself in certain areas of the north. This collaboration should not be forgotten, for it points to a willingness, on the part of all concerned, to accept the age-old adage, *salus naimarum suprema lex*.⁴⁹

Since the celebration of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Eastern Churches have manifested an ever greater desire to undertake, wherever possible, the pastoral care of the Eastern Rite faithful in accordance with their ecclesiastical traditions and heritage. In India this desire has intensified in recent years in the face the ever increasing phenomenon of the migration of Eastern Rite Catholics to areas covered by Latin Rite dioceses in the northern part of the country, such that at times they form a considerable number of faithful of these ecclesiastical territories, as for example in the areas of Bombay-Pune.⁵⁰

He notes:

The Second Vatican Council, in speaking of the pastoral duties of the bishops, declared that where are faithful of a different rite, the diocesan Bishop should provide for their spiritual needs, either through the priests or parishes of that rite, or through Episcopal vicars endowed with the necessary faculties.⁵¹

The Successor of St. Peter writes to the Bishops of India further:

Attention should be everywhere given to the preservation and growth of each individual Church. For this purpose, parishes and a special hierarchy should be established for each Church where the spiritual good of the faithful demands. All Eastern Rite members should know and be convinced that they can and should always preserve their lawful rites and their established ways of life.⁵²

As there are many members of the oriental Churches living among the members of Latin rite, the Pope clarifies the point that unity is not uniformity and that unity can be achieved even in diversity. He alludes to the Mystical Body of Christ and the different roles played by different parts in the body. 'This need to be faithful to the traditions and heritage of one's own Rite can in no way be considered as interfering with the task of the church to gather into one all the children of God who are scattered abroad' (St. John 11:52) or with the mission of the church to bring about the communion of all persons with the Redeemer. For as the same Decree rights remarks: 'That Church, holy Catholic, which is the mystical body of Christ, is made up of the faithful who are organically united in the Holy Spirit through the same faith, the same sacraments and the same government and who, combining into various groups held together by a hierarchy, for separate Churches or Rites. Between

these there flourishes such an admirable brotherhood that this variety within the church in no way harms her unity, but rather manifests it.⁵³

The history and the present position of the Syrian Christian community in Kerala is thus convincingly proved that their Church in Kerala was founded by the Apostle St. Thomas. A number of sources like archaeological, numismatic, oral tradition, the writings of the Fathers of the Church, liturgical and above all the existence of the Syrian Catholic community by name St. Thomas point to the apostolic origin of the church in Malabar. When we try to take a look at the history of a community existing in the early centuries of the Christian era, we should be careful not to project our ideas about the set up of a community in our own times lest we should be blamed for anachronism in historical researches. We should try to understand the colonial mentality that cast its shadows even on ecclesiastical matters. The socio-political movement in the Coromandel regions did not permit Christianity to flourish in that region though the tomb of St. Thomas was located there. Similarly, the rise of Islam in West Asia must have seriously affected the growth of the Syro-Malabar Church closely connected with the Church of Persia. Those who look for close and constant contact with the Church in Rome have to understand the dynamics of the oriental church and also the problems in West Asia which did not permit such a close contact. The suppression of Syro-Malabar Church right from the sixteenth century by the colonial powers and the attitude of the ecclesiastical authorities not to permit the Syrian Catholics to extend their activities under the banner of the Syro-Malabar Church outside Kerala may explain why the Apostolic Church could not and did not develop. The sudden change of attitude on the part of the authorities in the wake of decolonization and the new trends set by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, coupled with the appointment of an Indian Cardinal as the prefect of the Oriental Congregation as well as the visit of Pope John Paul II, gave a fillip to the growth of the Syro-Malabar Church. Just as the Republic of India continues to labour under the hangover of its colonial past, the Syro-Malabar Church also has to fight against a host of fissiparous tendencies. If the Church founded by the apostle could survive the ravages of colonial powers, it will continue to remain active and united amidst divisive forces at work. Nobody can underestimate the role played by the community of Syrian Christians in nation building in India.

End Notes

1. *The Examiner*, Bombay, 28 December 1985.
2. Pope John Paul II wrote on 28 May 1987 to the Bishops of India. Quoted by P.P. Xavier, *A Light from the East: Cardinal Lourdasamy, A Biography (hereinafter Biography)*, Pondicherry, 1987, p. 230.

3. *Acts of Judas Thomas* originated in a milieu of Upper-Mesopotamia, perhaps in Edessa. It may be dated back either to the last quarter of the second century AD or to the first years of the third century.
4. Eugene Cardinal Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity in India, A history of the Syro-Malabar Church from the Earliest time to the present Day*, Bombay, 1957, p. 2-3.
5. P.J. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, Bombay, (St. Paul Publications), 1970, pp. 18-19.
6. Tisserant, *op.cit.*, pp. 6-7.
7. Podipara, *op.cit.*, pp. 17-18.
8. Podipara, *op.cit.*, p. 25.
9. Colonel Yule, *The Book of Marco Polo*, 2nd edition, vol. 1 (London, 1875), pp. 21-22.
10. A.E. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle St. Thomas*, (London, 1905), pp. 90-92.
11. A.E. Medlycott, *op.cit.*, pp. 93-94
12. 'Proceeding onwards the said Nicolo arrived at a maritime city which is named Malepur, situated in the Second Gulf beyond the Indus-Bay of Bengal. Here the body of Saint Thomas lies honourably buried in a very large and beautiful Church' R.H. Major, *India in the Fifteenth Century - being a collection of Narratives of Voyages to India*, Delhi, 1974, p. 8
13. K.S. Mathew, 'The South Indian Apostolate of St. Thomas and the Portuguese in the Sixteenth century' *Christian Orient*, Kottayam, vol. vi, no. 1, pp. 5-12.
14. Podipara, *op.cit.*, p. 28.
15. Podipara, *op.cit.*, p. 29.
16. A.E. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas: An Enquiry with a critical analysis of the Acta Thomae* (London, 1905), S.J. Dahimann S J, *Die Thomas-Legende und die alten historischen Beziehungen des Christentums zum Fernen Osten*, Freiburg, I.B. 1912, J.N. Frakuhar, 'The Apostle Thomas in South India, in B.J.R.L, 11, 1927, pp. 20-50, Tisserant, *op.cit.*, Podipara, *op.cit.*
17. Medlycott, *St. Thomas Christians*, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, New York, vol. XIV, p. 680
18. J.S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, vol. III, p. 44.
19. E. Tisserant, *op.cit.*, p. 15.
20. Thomas Puthiakunnel, *Syro-Malabar Clergy and their General Obligations*, Emakulam, 1964, p. 1.
21. Cardinal Tisserant, *op.cit.*, p. 10.
22. Podipara, *op.cit.*, p. 26.
23. *Chronique de Seert, Histoire Nestorienne inedite*, ed., Mar Addai Scher, in P.O. 4, 1858, vol. II, col. 1086-1088
24. Labbeus, '*Sacrosancta Concilia*, Tom iii, 1728, col. 304, C.viii.

25. LE Quiesn, O.P., *Oriens Christianus in Quatuor Patriarchatibus digestus*, Paris, 1704, 1858, vo. 1, ii, col. 1086-1088.
26. E.O. Windstedt, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas Indecopleustes*, Cambridge, 1909, p. 321, 332, 344, 346; McCrindle, *The Christian Topography of Comos*, London, 1897, pp. 118-19.
27. J.S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana: Codicum Manuscriptorum Catalogus*, vol. lii, p. 599.
28. Tisserant, *op.cit.*, pp. 14-15; A Forescue, *The Lesser Eastern Churches*, London, 1913, p. 350
29. George Schurhammer, *The Malabar Church and Rome during the early Portuguese period and before*, Trichinopoly, 1934, pp. 29ff.
30. Assemani, *op.cit.*, vol. III, part 2, p. 616.
31. Adrian Forescue, *op.cit.*, pp. 96-98.
32. J.S. Assemani, *op.cit.*, vol. iii, p. 599.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 117-18.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 589ff.
35. Puthiakunnel, *op.cit.*, p. 9.
36. G. Beltrami, *La Chiesa Caldea nel Secolo dell'Unione*, Roma, 1933, p. 38.
37. J.C. Panjikaran, *The Syrian Church in Malabar*, Trichinopoly, 1914, p. 45.
38. For the decree of the Patriarch, ref. Beltrami, *op.cit.*, pp. 95-96.
39. F. Raulin, *Historia Ecclesiae Malabaricae cum Diamperitano Synodo*, Roma, 1745, pp. 13-15.
40. Beltrami, *op.cit.* pp. 248-49.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 248-49.
42. Goa was erected as an independent bishopric in 1534 and an archbishopric in 1558. Cochin was constituted as a diocese in 1558. Both of these were under the Portuguese Padroado.
43. Beltrami, *op.cit.*, p. 133.
44. Mylapore was erected as a diocese in 1608.
45. Beernard O.C.D., *A Brief Sketch of the History of St. Thomas Christians*, Trichinopoly, 1925, p. 61.
46. This separated section was in due course of time split into various denominations and a part of it came back to the Catholic faith and formed the Syro-Malankara Church in 1930. The Marthomite Church was formed from the Jacobites around 1875.
47. Ref. Augustine Kanjamala, ed., *Integral Mission Dynamics: An Interdisciplinary Study of the Catholic Church in India*, New Delhi

48. *Biography*, pp. 223-24.

49. *Ibid*, p. 230.

50. *Biography*, pp. 239-31.

51. *Biography*, p. 231.

52. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* 4 & 5 quoted by the Pope, ref. *Biography*, p. 231.

53. *Biography*, p. 232.