

Development of Monasticism in Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

Introduction

Monasticism is a way of life. It has deep roots in the history of all religious traditions. Different religions have their own monastic practices and all agree with the same thought that live a divine life by renouncing the worldly pleasures. In the history of human being the renunciation to the worldliness is a factor for the personal holiness. Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church also have the same conviction in its monastic nature. Though the monasticism, as a community oriented movement, is a later origin, the Church had a good foundation on the monastic concepts by its sages and hermits.

Origin of Christian Monasticism

Christian monasticism is motivated by a desire to seek God through a life of asceticism and prayer. Monasticism is defined as the ways of life lived by men and women who have made a solemn profession of their intentions, sealed by vows (typically poverty, chastity and obedience) which bind them to their chosen course for life.ⁱ It involves celibacy and a certain amount of seclusion from the world, normally including the renunciation of private property.ⁱⁱ The esteem for the celibate life among the faithful did not mean any disdain for marriage and the married life. The letters of St. Paul (1Cor. 7:1-40; Col. 3:18-24; Eph. 5:21-33) shows this.ⁱⁱⁱ

In Christian history, monasticism originated in the context of the internal decay of Roman Empire and the Church and the doctrinal conflicts among the Church. The movement had its origin in the fourth century. By the sixth century it had its deep roots in the Western and Eastern Christianity. The two main forms of monastic life are the hermit life and coenobitical life. The father of hermit monasticism is St. Antony and coenobitic is St. Pachomius. In the ancient church a lot of factors contributed to the rise and development of Monasticism. The wide spread belief of salvation from the clash of flesh and spirit stimulated rigid asceticism both within and outside the Christian movement.^{iv} Another cause for the monastic life was certain psychological tendencies. Many considered asceticism as a means of escape from harsh reality and the moral contamination of their times.^v Monasticism became a safe place for those in revolt against the growing decadence of the times. Some found asceticism as another form of persecution.^{vi} This led to enlarged appraisal of the ascetic life by serious-minded Christians.

Origin of Indian Monasticism

India had a glorious monastic past and it related with the earliest religions in the world like Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Hinduism is considered as the earliest among the world religions. The rejection of worldly goods and desires is the central theme of Hindu concept of holiness. From the very beginning Hinduism had monasticism or ascetic practices. In their quest to attain the [spiritual](#) goal of life, some Hindus choose the path of monasticism or [Sannyasa](#). Monks commit themselves to a life of [simplicity](#), [celibacy](#), detachment from worldly pursuits, and the contemplation of God. There are evidences regarding the hermits and seers who lived before 600 BC. Alexander the Great witnesses about the ascetics in India during his invasions here.^{vii} Though Hinduism is the oldest religion, its monastic traditions and values always indebted to contemporary religions like Buddhism and Jainism. In the pre-Buddhist India *rishis* and *gurukulas* were existed. But the monastic vows of chastity and a

rule of monastic conduct were not operative before the time of the Buddhist sangha about the 5th century BCE.^{viii}

Buddhism and Jainism, the two religions originated in India, practiced asceticism from its beginning. The Buddhist concept of *Sangha* is similar to the cenobetic monasticism in Christianity. In *Sangha* a monk should practice the spiritual development by solidarity, teaching, collecting daily food with a begging bowl, mutual acknowledgement, an ordered lifestyle, communal discipline, minimal privacy, etc.^{ix} Along with Buddhism, Jainism is the only [religion](#) having a purely monastic nature. Its rules for the laity too derived from monastic rules.^x The vows of the monks are more numerous and more intensive, but the way of life of the laity is simply an abridged monastic rule allowing more dispensations and compromise. The Jain monks practices mendicancy, extreme austerity, and detachment.

Monasticism in Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church is one of the ancient churches in the world. Its history trace back to the first century with the apostolic foundation of St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ. In the historical development, the Church had to receive a lot of external influences viz. the East Syriac, Catholic, West Syriac, Protestant etc. The Church had also a monastic nature, but unfortunately a systematic monasticism was originated only in the 20th century. Hence some sort of monastic spark was in the minds of a small group of people.

Documentary Evidences on Monasticism

Cosmos Indicopleustes writes “...in inner India where the Indian sea is, there is a church of Christians with clergy and a congregation of believers... As such also is the case in the land called Male (Malabar)... They have many martyrs and recluses leading a monastic life”.^{xi}

Joseph, the Indian said that “they (St. Thomas Christians) have monasteries where monks with black habits live a very chaste life. They have also many nuns”.^{xii}

Ancient Kerala

In ancient times, India was divided into so many local states or principalities. Malankara Nazranis were settled in South India or in Kerala. The people of ancient Kerala followed a Dravidian culture and practices, which were not based on a religion.^{xiii} They had a mixture of primitive rites and practices. In this circumstances the religions like Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Christianity, etc. came and flourish in Kerala. Of them, Christianity had a comparatively later origin. When Christianity became an influential religion, the faithful followed a mixture of Buddhist, Jain and Dravidian philosophies and cultures.

Influence of Buddhism and Jainism

Buddhism and Jainism might have come to Kerala in the 3rd century BC.^{xiv} Both religions were based on monastic concepts. In the middle of 7th century AD Hiouen Tsang, a Chinese pilgrim found the ruined Buddhist monasteries in Kerala.^{xv} The local rulers were also favour to these religions and accepted its practices. So there were probabilities for the monastic practices in Kerala from very ancient times. Though monasticism, as a practice of the

Christian church, originated in the 4th century, it always tried to keep and practice the monastic values in its teachings. When the people of Kerala embraced Christianity, there were possibilities for practicing the theories of Christianity in the light of Buddhist and Jain monastic concepts.

Influence of East Syriac Church

The relation between the Malankara *Nazranis* and the East Syriac Church or Persian Church commenced at least from 3rd century and it was strengthened with the Persian immigration under Thomas of Cana in the 4th century.^{xvi} The strong belief among the Malankara *Nazranis* is that the Church of St. Thomas declined in course of time and the arrival of Persian bishops solved the problem of apostolic succession and saved the Church from annihilation.^{xvii} Gradually the Malankara *Nazranis* became dependent of the Persian Church on clerical functions and thus the East Syriac practices came into the Church.^{xviii}

Monasticism in East Syrian Church was started in the first centuries of Christian era. There were evidences for the establishment of monasteries from the early fourth century.^{xix} As a part of their mission in India, the East Syrian Church sent monks as missionaries. Under Patriarch Timothy I, who guide the Persian Church from 779 AD onwards, the missionary activities expanded between these two Churches. He made a statement when the missionaries faced financial crisis that, “many monks voyage to India and China with only a stick and a purse. Consider yourself to have gone by sea with as much as they had.”^{xx}

Influence of Catholic Church

The advent of Catholic Church on Malankara did not fade the ascetic spirituality of Malankara *Nazranis*. Malankara Church was under the Portuguese rule and Catholic faith since 1498. But the Church was under the complete Catholic domination from Synod of Diamper to Oath of Coonan Cross. This might be influenced to be in Catholic form of monastic spirituality. It helped to spread the foreign monastic movements in Malankara. The Catholic Church started some monasteries in Kerala and of them the most important and an indigenised one was ‘Religious congregation of St. Thomas’ came into being in 1626.^{xxi} But the Portuguese missionaries and Jesuit Archbishops did not support this.

Monasticism in the Modern Age

After the Oath of Coonan Cross the ascetic spirituality of Malankara *Nazranis* continued and it reached its peak with the of West Syrian connection. In between and after a lot of saints and sages led an ascetic life in Malankara. The Mar Thoma Metrans, Malankara Metropolitans, Geevarghese Mar Gregorios (Parumala Thirumeni), Kadavil Mar Athansios, Pathros Mar Osthathios, Kuriakose Mar Gregorios (Pampadi Thirumeni), Thoma Mar Dionysius, Baselius Marhoma Mathews II, Geevarghese Mar Osthathios, Geevarghese Mar Ivanios, Mylapra Mathews Ramban, etc. are some of the ascetic leaders in Malankara. Almost all followed and practiced the West Syrian Monastic practices. The culmination of these solitary monastic experiences gave way to the coenobitic monasticism in 1918 by the formation of Bethany Ashram. Before this some of these monastic fathers alone or with some

of their contemporary monks led an ascetic life in some churches or monasteries like Vettikkal Dayara.

Monastic Communities of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

The first monastery in Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church was Bethany Ashram, Perunad, Ranni. Fr. P.T.Geevarghese (Mar Ivanios of Bethany) and Fr. Alexios (Alexios Mar Thodosius) were the founders of this Ashram. It was an after effect of the conference of all missionary societies in India held at Calcutta under the leadership of an American missionary John R. Mott.^{xxii} Inspiring with this, a group of energetic priests under Fr. P.T. Geevarghese, with the blessing of the then Malankara Metropolitan Mar Dionysious VI (St. Vattasseril Thirumeni) gave birth to the first monastic community in Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. Thus a great dream of many monks in Malankara became a reality.

Following this a lot of monasteries founded in different parts of India by different monastic leaders. Of them the important are: Christu Shishiya Ashram, Coimbatore; Mount Tabor Diara, Pathanapuram; Mar Kuriakose Ashram, Mylapra; St. Paul's Ashram, Puthupadi; Bethlehem Ashram Chengamanadu; St. George Mount Ashram, (Chayalode) Adoor; Holy Trinity Ashram, Ranni; Mar Baselious Diara, Njalikuzhy; St. Thomas Ashram, Bhilai; Mount Carmel Ashram, Kallada; Mount Horeb Ashram, Sasthamkotta; St. Thomas Ashram, Attapadi; Karuna Ashram, Karukachal; etc. All these monasteries contributing their own contributions to the Church and society by their prayers and social institutions like schools, colleges, hospitals, orphanages, and other charitable institutions, etc.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Monasticism has its own importance in the history of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. The Church was founded in a country which was famous for its ascetic spirituality. Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism contributes a lot to the monastic formation and development of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. The foreign churches which had contact with Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church also inserted their own influence to its ascetic development. The Malankara *Nazranis* were always bothered on their identity. This might have been a cause for its later origin of monasteries. Nevertheless, they practiced monasticism as a way of self-discipline and spiritual development. The monks of the Church lived an ascetic life without giving up the nature of monastic values. From the beginning of the Church, it had an ascetic spark and it developed day by day through its sages and foreign monks. There had an indigenous monastic culture till the arrival of foreign monks especially from the catholic domination. The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church opened a new chapter with the formation of monastery in 1918. Here and after the Church continued its monastic movement through monasteries, other communities and sometimes with solitary monks.

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in its history, always indebted to Monasticism and monks for its development. The basic aim and nature of monasticism is to pray and work for the spiritual development of the church and society. Christian monasticism was founded on the monastic vows like poverty, chastity and obedience. And it is existing on the monastic principles like prayer, mortification, manual work and silence. The great monks of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church before and after the formation of monasteries were always tried to keep these monastic values. Their words and deeds were according to that. The monasteries

of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church are also a power house of spirituality through their continues prayers and spiritual way of life. Although there are a little bit of deviations in the monastic ideals, because of societal changes and influences, the present monasteries and monks are giving a great deal of spiritual energy to the Church. So rightly we can say Monasticism and monks are the back born of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church.

ⁱ Diana Webb, "Monasticism and Religious Orders", *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, edited by John Bowden (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): 786.

ⁱⁱ E. A. Livingstone, "Monasticism", *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 384.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mar Abraham Mattam, *Forgotten East* (Satna: Ephrem's Publications, 2001), 186.

^{iv} Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 1, *The First Five Centuries* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1937), 354.

^v Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Tiruvalla: Suvartha Bhavan, 2004), 145.

^{vi} Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), 125.

^{vii} Varghese Joseph, *The Way of a monk* (Kottayam: Ephphatha Print House, 2017), 95.

^{viii} <https://www.britannica.com/topic/monasticism/Varieties-of-monasticism-in-the-religions-of-the-world>, 18.07.18.

^{ix} Varghese Joseph, *The Way of a monk*, 91.

^x <https://www.britannica.com/topic/monasticism/Varieties-of-monasticism-in-the-religions-of-the-world>, 18.07.18.

^{xi} Anto Thekkudan, "Sources of Sprirtuality of the St. Thomas Christian Church in the Pre-Diamper Period" in *The Life and Nature of the St. Thomas Christian Church in the Pre-Diamper Period*, edited by, Bosco Puthur, (Kochi: LRC Publications, 2000), 142.

^{xii} A. Mathiyas Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. 1, *From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1984), 187.

^{xiii} A. Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History* (Kottayam: D. C. Books, 2007), 83.

^{xiv} *Ibid*, 84 – 85.

^{xv} T. K. Velu Pillai, *The Travancore State Mannual*, vol.II, (Thiruvananthapuram: Government of Kerala, 1996), 37.

^{xvi} David Daniel, *The Orthodox Church in India* (New Delhi: Miss Rachel David, 1986), 86-87.

^{xvii} A. Mathias Mundadan, *Indian Christians: Search for Identity and Struggle for Autonomy* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1984), 8.

^{xviii} Roger E. Hedlund, *Quest for Identity* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 53.

^{xix} Michal Bar-Asheer Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 35 -65.

^{xx} A. Mathiyas Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 101.

^{xxi} Anto Thekkudan, "Sources of Sprirtuality of the St. Thomas Christian Church in the Pre-Diamper Period, 142.

^{xxii} Kuriakose OIC, *Malamadakkile Kedavilakku* (Ranny: Bethany Ashram, 1994), 26.