

Gurukul Lutheran Theological collage and Research Institute, Madaras

SUBJECT : INDIGENIZATION AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

TOPIC: MALABAR SYRIAN CHRISTIANS AND THEIR INTERACTION WITH LOCAL CULTURE AND PRACTICES

Course Facilitator

Rev.Dr.J.G.JacobSundarsingh

Presented by

AjishBabu (MTh-1)

1 INTRODUCTION

The Syrian Christian community of Malabar is one of the traditional Christian communities in India. However, Syrian Christian community, an organ of believing history began in AD 52. St. Thomas is the founder of Syrian community, who came in AD 52. During that time, Kochi was the business places (commercial trade location). Many Jewish peoples stayed in Kochi however, transportation was possible. During those days, St Thomas baptized few families; also he was considered as the father of faith in the society. Another name of this community was St. Thomas Christians. This paper analyses on the beginning of Malabar Syrian Christians interaction in local culture and practices.

2 THE FORMATION OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

There were two views among the scholars about the origin of Christianity in India. According to the first view it was through the St. Thomas and the second, through St. Bartholomew.¹ These all are historical traditions, but St. Thomas tradition is the most power full one, since this tradition is still living society in Kerala.

The Early Christian community believed that the St. Thomas evangelized India especially in the Malabar Coast during the 1st century AD. He moved to other part of Kerala and founded Seven and half church (faith community) namely Maliankara, Palayur, Parur, Quilon, Gokamangaalam, Niranam, Chayal and Nilakel. During this time, around 32 Brahmin families were converted by St. Thomas and they were from Pakalomattam, Sankerepuri, Kalli, Kalliankal². Another study reveals that, during the saga period (BC 216-438 AD) Kerala was in control of (ruled by)Chera

¹A.M Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India vol-1*(Bangalore: CHAI,2001),21 .

² Bobby Thomas. *Christianikal, ChristumathathinoruKaippusthakam* (Kottayam: DC Books,2016)244

Kingdom, and there were no Brahmin family in Kerala.³ They followed Dravidian culture. However, this was the two-views of the origin existed in the Malabar Christian community.

So, let us first study on the most accepted Kerala Syrian community, because it is one of the largest communities in Kerala.

3 SOCIAL LIFE OF ST. THOMAS CHRISTIANS

St. Thomas Christian communities are basically Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, Malankara Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church, Malabar Independent Syrian Church, Chaldean Syrian Church, Syro-Malabar Catholic Church and Syro-Malankara Catholic Church. Most St. Thomas Christians were involved in agriculture, trade and military service. Syrian community transferred their land to their generation, still kept the value of good agricultural life. They were land owners of the Kerala society, which gave a focus on Malabar Christian community as a feudal centered society⁴. At the same time, they were part of caste system, because they belonged to the Hindu caste system. Malabar Christians adopted caste system from the earliest century, immigrations time Kerala Kings and other political forces gave this identity. However, this identity was the part of business motive.

During 18th century, that is during the colonial time they changed their customs, social thought and world views. Therefore, fact of their social change was Western Education, Transportation, New money economy and Industrialization.⁵ These changes began after the missionary movement in Kerala. Immigrations played an important role in the St. Thomas social history, because those processes lead to change the identity of St. Thomas Christian community.

4 SYRIAN IDENTITY

The connection between the Church in India and Syrian Christianity began in the third or fourth century. Gradually the Churches in India became dependent on the later so that everything ecclesiastical in India was **parcatically** East-Syrian. While this preserved a strong Christian tradition, it prevented the Church of India from developing an Indian culture⁶. By the 50th century the ecclesiastical tie-up between Persia and the Christians of India were regularized and

³ George K Alex, *Adhivesa Virudhathyude Daivasasthram*, (Thiruvalla: CSS, 2000) 27

⁴ George K Alex, *Adhivesa Virudhathyude Daivasasthram*, (Thiruvalla: CSS, 2000), 29

⁵ L.W Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas an account of ancient Syrian church of Malabar* (New York: Cambridge, 1956) 167

⁶ AM Mundadan, *Indian Christian : Search for Identity and struggle for autonomy* (Bangalore : Dharmaram publications , 2003)

strengthened; resulting in the use of Syriac as their ecclesiastical language and hierarchical dependency on the Persian church. But gradually the original Indian Christianity was eclipsed, absorbed and Syrianized.

4:1 IMMIGRATED CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, CULTURE, AND PRACTICES

Kerala was a major market in the ancient period, but many people immigrated in Kerala. That immigration introduced their culture and practices, it is very important in the St. Thomas historical study. Because Thomas of Cana came on AD 345, that time he gave new caste centered custom. The colonization started with the purpose of promoting trade as well as for strengthening the church in Kerala. The immigrants were around 400 including Priest, Woman, and Children. After that, it became a regular practice for Priests, Prelates ordained in Persia, and neighboring areas to come to Kerala to carry out ecclesiastical function in the church. Today they remain as different community and church in Kerala.

Second Persian immigration was in Quilon on AD 825, that time Quilon was a business place in south Kerala, because of the main port and was a business place in history of South Travancore⁷. It also used Portuguese, Dutch and British⁸. During 825 AD Marwan Sabae Iso and Mar Produ came to Quilon. The ruler of Kerala welcomed the Persian Christians and provided various privileges. Ayyanadikal Thiruvadikal gave cooper plates (this is today available in Kerala). These all event introduces historically, Syrian community was social, politically, culture gave another spirit.

4:2 CULTURES AND CUSTOMS OF SYRIAN CHRISTIANS

The Christians of Kerala were Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion and Oriental in Worship. Religion has to do a lot in forming and shaping the culture of a particular community. Culture has different meanings but the culture of the land, the people is closely interrelated with the literature, both religious and secular, poetry, drama, architecture etc. Especially in Hinduism, more than any other religions or cultures in the world, all the above items were closely linked with Hindu religion and one cannot be separated from the other. The traditional religion and the

⁷<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/history/quilon>

⁸L.W Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas an account of ancient syrian church of malabar*(New york: Cambridge,1956)65

traditional culture in India are almost the same throughout the history. The art and literature derive their inspiration and development from the traditional beliefs and scriptures.⁹

4:2:1 Traditions and rituals among the Saint Thomas Christians of Kerala

1. The symbol of the Nasranis was the Persian cross, also it is called as Mar ThomaSleebea in Malayalam. It is not very clear from which century onward this cross was in use. According to JRaulin, up to 16th century, the Saint Thomas Christians did not use any other image, except the Saint Thomas Cross in their Churches.
2. Covered their heads during worship. This was a tradition among the Jewish descendants of Abrahamic religion. The entire Nasrani people observed this until this day.
3. Their ritual services (liturgy) was and still is called as the Qurbana (also spelled Kurban), which is derived from the Hebrew Korban (קרבן), meaning “Sacrifice”.
4. The Nasrani Qurbana used to be sung in the Suryani (Syriac) language. Until 1970s most of the churches followed Syriac liturgy.
5. The architecture of the early church reflected a blend of Jewish and Kerala styles.
6. Pesaha, the ritual supper, which is the narration of the Paschal event, it celebrated among Saint Thomas Christians. The observance of Pesaha at home is an unbroken tradition only which the Saint Thomas Christians has in the whole Christian world. It is the real Paschal catechesis in the families.
7. The Churches has a separate seating arrangement for men and women.
8. Many of the tunes of the Syrian- Christian worship in Kerala are remnants of the ancient Syriac tunes of antiquity.
9. The “Holy of Holies” divided by a red curtain most of the time, was opened during the central part of the Qurbana.
10. The Baptism is still called by the Hebrew-syriacterm Mamodisa and follows many of the ancient rituals of the ceremony. In the 20th century, it is referred to Malayalam as njanasnanam (Bath of Wisdom).
11. Most of the Nasrani’s even today use Biblical names like Jews. Biblical names along with Greek, Armenian, Syrian names are the popular names in Nasrani Community throughout existence. They prefix and suffix Kerala names to these traditional names. The naming

⁹ V. Balakrishnan , *History of the syrian Christians of Kerala : A Critical Study*, (Thrissur: Kerala SPublication, 1999)142-143

conventions are also seen among the Sephardic Jews, whose customs may have been imbibed by the Syrian Christians in Kerala.

12. Immediately after a Child was born, a priest or male relative would shout in the child's ear ' Maron Yesu Mishiha' (Jesus Christ is Lord) and the child would be fed with three drops of honey in which a little gold had been rubbed.

13. Another surviving tradition is the use of "Muthukoda" (ornamental umbrella) for church celebrations, marriages and other festivals. This can be traced back to a Syrian Christian Aristocrat Mar Sapir Iso who lived in the ninth century. Even today, traditional drums, Arch decorations, and ornamental umbrella are part of the church celebrations. Because of the harmonical co-existence of religions in Kerala, this became quite popular with other communities also.

14. Saint Thomas Christians were given the right to access Hindu temples and sacred territory. Some prominent Nasranis were patron and sponsors at Hindu temple festivals. They also acted as pollution neutralizers.

15. Nasranis and Hindus maintained their individuality in Kerala aware of and accepting the similarities and differences. Boundaries between Christians and Hindus were blurred in some cultural sphere such as house building, astrology, birth and marriage

16. The inner life of Nasranis significantly ordered by liturgical obligations and by its specifically Christian ethics. Death rituals express Christian canonical themes very **distantly** especially in the ideas concerning life after death and the anticipation of final judgment.

17. Christians were also given some honorific titles. "Taragan" is a word derived from the word for tariff. "Panikkar denotes proficiency in military training. The most common name of the Christians were Nasrani Mappila's.

18. The Church of Saint Thomas Christians accepted the East Syriac liturgy from an early period and along with the liturgy, the systems of ecclesial government, such as Metropolita, Archdeacon and Yogams had their organic development in relation with East Syriac Churches¹⁰.

¹⁰<http://www.nasrani.net/2007/01/12/preserved-traditions-rituals-of-christians-of-kerala/#ixzz4mmhh5ocM>, Dr. P J Thomas

4:2:2 CHURCH

In Alleppey, a newly emerging urban center in Travancore, during the eighteenth century was a Hindu temple and a Syrian Christian church which was built on adjoining sites, in the case of older churches and temples in places such as Niranom, Chengannur, Kallopara, and Parur between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Christians continued to use Hindu style torches, umbrellas, and banners at their festivals to honor saints and bishops of the Syrian church. There was at least one Hindu temple, which lent its temple elephants for Syrian Christian festival processions¹¹.

4:2:3 AFTER THE EASTER

After the Easter services, people cry *poynpoyinas* they walk in procession down the street. *Poyin* means, “go way” and is heraldic in nature, signifying that higher castes are abroad and lower castes must therefore remove themselves from the path. This custom only practice in Kottayam area.¹²This local custom of Kottayam sided but it is contextual custom.

4:2:4 MARRIAGE:

The Christians, like Hindus, had faith in horoscopes, they used *thali* or marriage locket, then the priest places the *manthrokodi*, which is a gift from bridegroom to the bride on the grooms head. This custom was copied from the Brahmins. A concern with charting genealogies is also typical of these Christians and signifies their need to keep marriages endogamous and status bound¹³.

4:2:5 DEATH:

After the death, a pollution period of ten to fifteen days observed, vegetarianism is the food during mourning periods, and ceremonial bathing is done to remove death pollution (*pulakuli*), funeral rites followed by feasting (*adyantram*)

¹¹<http://centrerright.in/2012/09/the-syrian-christians-of-kerala-part-1/#ts-fab-latest-posts-below>, [Dr George Gheverghese Joseph](#)

¹² Susan Visvanathan, *The Christians of Kerala history, belief and ritual among the Yakoba*, (New York: Oxford University, 1993)3

¹³ Susan Visvanathan, *The Christians of Kerala history, belief and ritual among the Yakoba*, (New York: Oxford University, 1993)4

4:2:6 FESTIVALS:

Kerala Christians celebrated *Onam*, *Vishu*, the celebration of *annaprasanam*; these festivals were Hindu religious centered.¹⁴ This all customs were part of Hindu religion, but during the early period Syrian community accepted some customs especially in the lower caste community.¹⁵ However, it is a counter study of caste oriented Syrian community.

Marriage:

- In Lower caste people and Syrian Christians custom, the bride is tied with *thali* in groom but, higher caste Hindu people custom, before the marriage father of groom ties the *thali*.
- In Lower caste people and Syrian Christians custom, they are married in their family but Brahmin family system, only senior member married in their family.
- In Lower caste people and Syrian Christians custom, widows do not married her brother-in-law but Brahmin widows are remarried to their brother-in-law

Death:

- In Lower caste people and Syrian Christians custom, after death religious leaders seated in chair and **their burial serves same** dead body seated position, but Brahmins after death burns the dead body.¹⁶ This all analyses are part of Syrian and caste debate.

The category of time, space, and the body articulated in social use represents the world that was held in common by the Christians and Hindus of Kerala. While these elements were not thought of as constitutive of Hinduism, they are acknowledged as having developed in the idiom and language of Hinduism.

5 CONCLUSION

History of understating the Syrian customs was done in two way; one in a traditional way and the second in a post-colonial way. Post-colonial understanding of Syrian history and its custom is a critical method of traditional history and custom. However, Malabar Syrian Christian community is also the part of Kerala society because they were part of the culture. This all forms part of the ecclesiastical development of Malabar Syrian Christians.

¹⁴ Ibid., 4

¹⁵ George K Alex, *Adhivesa Virudhathyude Daivasasthram*, (Thiruvalla: CSS, 2000) 32

¹⁶ Ibid., 33

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