

Center for Orthodox Studies (COS)

Autonomous Center – OCP Society

☰ Menu

Home

COS Articles

About the Center ▾

OCP Society

Areas of Research

Collaborations

Projects ▾

Co

The 'Lost Past' of Malankara Nasrani Christians – An Overview

Share 120

Tweet

Pin it



Map of South India -Guzurat Narsinga, 1588. Source - <http://kallivalli.blogspot.com>.

George Alexander – Center for Orthodox Studies (COS) – 15/10/2019

Chief Research Consultant – Jeevan Philip

Declaration – Kindly note that the concepts and hypotheses mentioned in the Malankara Nasrani research series have been researched and coined by Mr. Jeevan Philip. This is declaration is to protect the intellectual property rights of Mr. Jeevan Philip.

This brief article is a continuation of our previous articles 'St. Thomas and Judeo- Dravidian Nasrani Church' and 'Malankara Nazranieth, Malankara Moopan, and Pallivanaperumal' on the Malankara Nasrani Church. In this piece, we will focus more on the unique traditions and practices of the Malankara Nasrani Christians. In this article, I have compiled research resources from various scholars.

'Nasranis lived as a 'high-class' caste in Kerala for nineteen centuries.' – George Varghese (Author of *Malankara Nasranikalude Jathyiolkrishtayum Rajyasevana Nirathayum*).

The age-old Nasrani religious and cultural practices and traditions were either lost or altered as time passed by, whereas some are still in practice in their original forms. The paper also focuses on various other elements such as Nasrani Church structure and leadership. However, the paper does not discuss each and every aspect of the Nasrani traditions and practices. It consists of views and arguments from other authors and critical responses to the same. The idea is to bring together various elements from the lost past of Nasrani religious life and culture. This paper is written in accordance with the ancient Malankara Nasranieth and its successors (Malankara Orthodox Church, Syriac Orthodox Church in India, Marthoma Church and the Thozhiyoor Independent Church).

'The first Christians of Kerala may be the merchant community hailing from the new faith who settled here temporarily or permanently for business purpose.' – Dr. C I Issac.

I. On the Origin of the Malankara Church

A number of hypotheses on the origin of Malankara Church have been in circulation among the faithful, Church historians and secular researchers for several centuries. A few are discussed below.

Recent

- » The 'Lost Past' of Malankara Nasrani Christians – An Overview
- » The Indian Kalamkari Pa Jesus Christ – A Short An
- » COS Declaration on Malankara Nasrani Research Paper:
- » The Saint, the Priest, and tattoos
- » Orthodox Christian Com Central and South Asia

Powered by Orthodox
Cognate PAGE



Orthodoxy ...
4.9K likes

Like Page

Be the first of your friends to like this



Orthodoxy
Cognate PAGE
- Pan-
Orthodox

The first and most prominent belief is that the Malankara Church was established by St. Thomas the Apostle as part of his evangelical mission to India. Rt. Rev. Chorbishop Kyriakose Thottupuram argues that a group of Christian Monks/missionaries from the Church of the East established the Christian Church in Malankara. Since St. Thomas was the founder of the Church of the East, hence, Malankara Church venerates the Apostle as her founder as well. Malankara Nasranis are also known as Syrian Christians because of their East Syriac connection. Jeevan Phillip argues that the Malankara Church and the Malankara Nasrani community were established as a result of the mixing of early Jewish Christians and the Dravidian population. This argument is supported by scholars like Dr. C I Issac. The fourth argument is that Malankara Nasranis are the descendants of St. Thomas Christians who migrated from the Northern area of Parthia and Taxila. Some others argue that it was the Portuguese who called Malankara Nasranis 'St. Thomas Christians'. Scholars like late T K Joseph supported such arguments. However, authors like Iswar Sharan state that Christianity was introduced (especially in the Southern part of India) with the arrival of Thomas of Cana 345 AD with 72 Syrian Christian families and their Bishop Uraha Mor Joseph of Urfa. A less popular argument is connected with St. Bartholomew the Apostle, who is believed to evangelize Kalyan and Konkan regions.



An old carved wooden cross found on the ceiling of the St. Thomas Orthodox Cathedral, Karthigappally. Pic- COS.

II. The Nasrani Caste

Malankara Nasranis were a caste-based community. They followed and worshipped the Yeshua of Nazareth. They attended Liturgy and prayed in Churches. The Judeo Dravidian Community in Malankara had its own unique practices. They were one of the first followers of the Yeshu of Nazareth. Nasranis believed in Jesus, engaged in Christian worship and prayers, but their practices and customs were highly Dravidian in its content, outlook, and essence with the presence of Jewish elements.

III. Nasrani Church Structure and Leadership

The Malankara Nasrani Church structure, leadership and the development of Episcopate in Malankara were already discussed in the previous papers. Malankara Nasranis were led by the Moopans. Malankara Moopans were the custodians of the Malankara Nazranieth and it was the system that governed the Malankara Nasrani community.

IV. From a Caste Based System to Pauline Church-Based System

The transition of the Malankara Nasrani community from a caste-based society to an organized Pauline Christian community was highly complex. The arrival of the Church of the East and Portuguese Christianity paved the way for the change. Portuguese domination and the Synod of Diamper intensified the change from a caste-based community to mainstream Christianity. This is quite evident from the decisions made and changes implemented in Malankara after the Synod of Diamper.

V. Liturgy, Prayers, and Worship

Theophilus the Indian, the Arian Bishop (who supported Arianism) who was a native of the Maldives, visited India, especially Kerala, (around 354 AD) where he found a group of Christians who practiced distinct ways of worship. The indigenous group of Christians sang, and they worshiped in a sitting position (they sat down even when the Gospel was read). Theophilus changed this practice by asking them to stand during worship and gospel readings. Even today the Nasrani Christians recite prayers in sitting positions in their houses. Usually, they use grass mats to sit for worship. No change has been applied to such practices (except in Church Liturgy). However, the Uniate Papist (who separated from the Malankara Nasranis) in Malankara kneel for prayers, a practice introduced by the Portuguese.

VI. Church Buildings and Structure

Nasrani Church buildings originated in Dravidian style, and outlook. They had simple interiors. Later it was influenced by the Portuguese and Syriac Christianity. Foreign Christian contacts contributed to extensive changes in Nasrani Church architecture and construction.

VII. From Tharakootam (Nattukootam) to Malankara Association

The Dravidian Tharakootam or Nattukootam was the basic democratic structure of the Malankara Nasranis. Dr. C. I Issac states that this system was known as Manram, which was the traditional village assembly of Dravidians. Looking further into the Manram system, we understand that it was the village level governance system. Manram's were presided by the village heads or Moopans and the gatherings were under a central banyan tree in the village. Manram's were cast-religious based system as well i. e. each caste had their own Manrams. The Nasrani community gatherings were presided by Moopans. This system underwent drastic transformation by the arrival of foreign Christianity. The Nasrani Tharakootam was later transformed into Malankara Palliyogam or Pothuyogam. Dr. Issac also states that 'Bishopric' was introduced by the Latins, which was alien to the Nasranis. Presided by the Malankara Metropolitan, the present-day system is known as Malankara Christian Association, which is the world's largest democratic parliament.

VIII. Funeral and Burial Practices

The funeral and burial practices of Nasranis are unique as well. After the burial, the bed of the departed is covered with white cloth and lighted candles or lamps are placed near the bed for forty days. The practice of 'Panamvekkal' is a unique post-burial practice of the Malankara Nasranis.

IX. Naming of Children

The naming of children is another unique tradition. Malankara Nasranis use a combination of Judeo-Christian and Dravidian names. The arrival of Portuguese imperial missionaries made several attempts to change this age-old tradition. The Papist Uniates adopted European ways of naming, whereas the Malankara Nasranis continue their old naming practices.

X. Culinary Practises

The culinary tradition of the Malankara Nasrani has certain peculiarities, especially when it comes to fermentation. Palappam or

Kalappam are the two traditional unique breakfast items in Kerala and Nasranis prepare them using alcohol (Toddy). Kalthappam is another unique Nasrani pancake/bread prepared mainly using unleavened batter made out of Urad dal, coconut, rice flour, garlic, shallots, etc. This is similar to the pancake prepared in the Middle East or West Asia. It is prepared by heating above and below portions of the pancake. Jeevan Philip states that this is an exclusive preparation when we consider the usual cooking methods of Kerala. Kalthappam is a unique Passover culinary tradition practiced by the Malankara Nasranis.

XI. Author George Varghese on Malankara Nasrani Practises

According to author George Varghese, Malankara Nasranis had numerous 'UnChristian Practices'. It is important to note that these practices were common and Nasranis did not consider them pagan or Unchristian. For example, the Nasranis believed in Moksha, fate, and reincarnation. Nasranis believed that those people who were killed in battles or martial arts competitions were qualified for a special place in heaven (Veeraswargam). They practiced polygamy as well. Polygamy was considered legal and marriages were blessed by the Church. They also performed Pooja of saints, for example, the Holy Theotokos. Hindu festivals like Onam and Vishu were celebrated by the Nasranis. Hindus were also a common presence in the Church, during worship.

XI (a). Martial Arts and Nasrani Soldiers

George Varghese states that Nasranis were experts in traditional martial arts. The Malankara Moopan or the head of the Malankara Nasranis maintained his own army. Nasrani men practiced martial arts (Kalari Pyattu) at the age of seven. Many Nasrani men were members of the Royal Army. Nasranis served as soldiers and heads of the army in Cochin, Chembakassery, and Travancore Kingdoms. They also served for the Portuguese and Dutch as well.



South Indian Warrior of Eight Century Kerala Warrior. Source- Society Papers.

XI (b). The Nasrani Army

As mentioned above, the head of the Malankara Nasranis (Moopan, later Malankara Metropolitan) maintained his own army. The army protected the head of the Malankara Nasranis.

'Mar Thomas, the other Bishop, is a native of Malabar. He is a black man, dull and slow of understanding. He lives in great state: and when he came into the city to visit the commandant, he was attended by a number of soldiers bearing swords and shields in imitation of the princes of Malabar.' Jacob Canter Visscher (Letters from Malabar, 1862. The same was mentioned in Malankara Nasranikalude Jathyiolkrishhtayum Rajyasevana Nirathayum).

Criticisms on the Arguments Put Forward by George Varghese

Many of the above-mentioned details put forward by George Varghese can be criticized with regard to the historical reality. Jeevan Philip is of the opinion that there are several 'over-glorified' aspects in the arguments of George Varghese, especially martial arts training of Nasranis and their involvement with many royal kingdoms. Nasranis were well-known merchants. Martial Arts were a part of their lives. However, the argument that Nasranis were trained in martial arts from their childhood and that they served as soldiers in several kingdoms should be scrutinized.

XII. Church of the East Connection

The Church of the East- Malankara connection had a lot of interesting twists and turns. Malankara Moopan – the head and chief custodian of the Malankara Nasranis was degraded to the position of an Archdeacon. The Church of the East connection did not result in any considerable positive outcome for the Malankara Church. Several historians sympathize with the

Church of the East and they wrongly associate the Church of the East with the 'Persian Church' stating that the Malankara Church was an ecclesiastical province of the so-called Persian Church from the early centuries.

XIII. Changes Implemented as a Result of Portuguese Influence and the Synod of Diamper, According to Author Scaria Zachariah

Author Scaria in his work 'Udayamperoor Sunnahadosinte Kanonakal' states that many changes were implemented by the Synod of Diamper (1599) under the leadership of Archbishop Aleixo de Menezes. The Synod was a negative game-changer of Malankara Nasranis, as they were ripped of their ancient customs, and practices. The life was never the same as before for the followers of Yeshu of Naserth in Malankara. Until the Oath of the Leaning Cross, the Nasranis were crushed under the imperial yoke of the Papists.

XIII(a). Appointing Parish Priests

According to Scaria, the Portuguese introduced the practice of appointing priests to each parish. Prior to the Portuguese arrival, each parish was served by Priests who were members of the same parish (Deshathu Pattakkar). The most senior priests among the 'Deshathu Pattakkar' functioned as 'Moopan'. This practice was stopped by the Portuguese. The Portuguese forced the Malankara Nasrani Priests to adhere to celibacy. This practice is still followed by Uniate Papist rites who are under Rome, whereas Malankara Nasrani Priests continue to follow the ancient practices of getting married.

XIII (b). Introduction of Religious Statues, Attire, and Architecture

Zachariah states that Portuguese Latins introduced statues to Malankara Nasrani parish Churches. Crosses and Gospel was the



Museum Replica of the Event of the Synod of Diamper. Pic-COS.

most important item in Nasrani Churches before the arrival of the Latins. Some Church buildings had wall paintings as well. They also introduced Latin liturgical vestments. Church buildings were forced to adopt Latin style in construction (especially the interior) and outlook.

XIII (C). Introduction of Confession and Forceful Celibacy of Priests

'Confession to Priests' was introduced by the Latin Portuguese authorities as per Zachariah. He also states that Archbishop Menasis demanded celibacy of Nasrani priests. He cursed married priests and forced them to abandon their families.

XIII(d). Ban on the Attire and Participation in Non-Christian Celebrations

The Portuguese banned Nasrans from taking part in Hindu and other non-Christian celebrations. The Portuguese missionaries also asked Nasrans to change their dress code and attire. Nasrani men were asked to stop piercing their ears and refrain from using earrings.

XIII(e). Other Changes

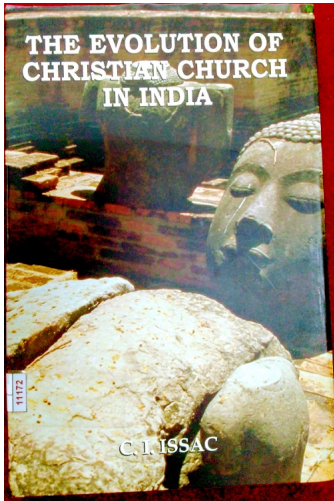
The Synod of Diamper resulted in various other changes as well. Zachariah considers these changes as positive and progressive steps that played an important role in the progress of the Christian communities in Malankara. For example, the Synod banned Nasrans from demanding high interests in business, and also banned them from fixing marriages at an early age (it was a practice among the Nasrans to fix marriages at an early age). The Synod also made it mandatory to use the Malayalam language for worship and prayers. Western missionaries established several educational institutions. The Synod also banned untouchability practices among Nasrans.

XIV. Comments by Dr. Issac on the Origins of Malankara Christianity and the Synod of Diamper

Dr. C. I Issac argues that the Malankara Nasrans came into existence as a result of the Jewish-Dravidian wedlock. This intermixing gave birth to black jews. He rejects the 'Thomasian' heritage of the Malankara Nasrans. He states that the Christians of Kerala followed different social models from mainstream Christianity.

He is of the opinion that the Synod of Diamper made several changes. The Portuguese tried to latinize the indigenous Church. To bring the Nasrans under the Papal rule, the Romans established a Bishopric at Cochin. They also established a seminary and a Jesuit college in Cochin to familiarise the Roman Catholic systems. They tried to influence Nasrans through Pothuyogmas as well.

Latins banned Thalickettu (tying of Thaali) during the wedding ceremony (this practice was later restored). They forced Nasrans to



abstain from using Dravidian names and the Nasrani priests were asked to use roman cassocks. Dressing patterns, rituals and practices of the Nasrans Christians were either defaced or shattered under Roman rule. The Portuguese dismissed the Nasrans practice of taking bath and abstaining from consuming beef before entering the Church as unnecessary practices. Nasrani consultations with astrologers were banned. Latins made it mandatory to bless marriages in the Church, instead of the age-old Nasrani practice of solemnizing at the residence of the bride or the groom.

Dr. Issac notes that it was customary for the Paraya Moopans to be buried in sitting position, a practice currently followed by Nasrani Christians (Malankara Church, Jacobite Syrians, Marthoma, Thozhiyoor communities). The Malankara Catholics also practice similar burial rituals. It is interesting to note that the Syriac Orthodox Church no more practices this ritual.

The Nasrans also practiced the ritual of offering obsequies for the souls of the dead ancestors. However, the British Missionaries forcefully curtailed such practices and also forced the Nasrans to stop the practice of social customary rituals like the use of tobacco and alcohol during marriage ceremonies.

The Portuguese Latin attempts to Westernize the Nasrans were severe in all aspects. The imperial and colonial attempts of the Roman Catholic missionaries met with great success. A section of the Nasrans community under the leadership of Parambil Chandy (Alexander de Campo) separated from the Malankara Church and joined the Roman Catholic Church as a result of the Latin 'colonial missionary invasion' of the Malankara Church.



Dravidian Untouchables of Malabar. Pic- Wiki.

XIV (a). Dr. Issac on Knanaya Christians

Dr. Isaac has given some interesting observations on the Knanaya community of Malankara. He states that many of the unique practices claimed by the Knanaya community are in practice among some of the subaltern communities in Kerala. The Knanaya practice of the use of alcohol, nadavali, thalakettu, hair cutting custom during the wedding ceremony was already in practice among the subaltern casts like Vathies, Velans, Vannanas, Vetas, and Parayas. Dr. Issac also rejected the racial purity claimed by the Knanaya communities.

XV. Relationship with the Syriac Church

Contacts with the Syriac Church and arrival Mor Abdul Jaleel Gregorious of Jerusalem (1665) paved way for a new era for the Malankara Nasrans. The Nasrani Church completely adopted and accepted the West Syriac traditions and liturgical practices. The 'Syriacization' process of Nasrans took place in full fledge as the

Malankara Church became ecclesiastically 'dependent' on the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East.

XVI. Anglican and Protestant Influences

The Anglican and various Protestant communities had their own share of influence on the ancient Malankara Nasrans. A section

of the Malankara Nasranis (Marthoma Church) separated from the Malankara Church under the influence of reformation ideologies. Reformation thoughts have influenced Malankara Nasranis in several aspects, especially as a result of mixed marriages.

Nasrani Separation from the Dravidian Culture

Malankara Nasranis had an in-depth relationship with non-Christians, especially the Hindu communities. This was questioned by Archbishop Menezes and his companions. He banned Nasranis from their intense interaction and cooperation with the Hindu communities. Several Dravidian cultural practices associated with the Nasrani baptisms, marriages and funerals were stopped by the Latin Church authorities. For example, the Hindu rite of 'Pelakuli' was common among Nasranis. Many such practices were completely stopped.

The arrival of foreign Christianity 'whitewashed' the local flavor and essence of Malankara Nasranis. Malankara Nasranis, one of the first followers of Yeshua of Nazareth (who was the greatest revolutionary in the history of mankind) lived a simple life by imbibing local culture and practices. Does this mean that Nasranis were Pagans and only foreign 'Christian' Churches could revive them according to the Middle East, European and English Christian standards? Religious syncretism is a reality in the world and it was a great reality in Malankara. However, the foreign Christian Churches, one way or the other, exercised a kind of 'forced religious' syncretism on the Malankara Nasranis. Was it wrong for the Nasranis to practice 'Jesus religion' by following the local cultural system? What did the Malankara Nasrani community gain from the imperial foreign Christianity? Did it help the Nasranis to revive and enlighten themselves? Are the Nasranis truly happy that they are almost cut off from their original roots?

Historically, the Nasrani community has gone through enormous religious, social and cultural 'molding' by the Persians, Latins, Syriacs, Anglicans, and various protestant groups. The present-day Nasrani community is just a living 'reminiscence' of their glorious indigenous past.

References:

Interview with Jeevan Philip

Varghese, G. (1988). *Malankara Nasranikalude Jadolkrishtathayum Rajyasevana Nirathayum*. 1st ed. Kottayam: M.O.C Publications.

Cheriyar, C. (2003). *Orthodox Christianity in India*. 1st ed. Kottayam: Academic Publishers.

Issac, C. (2014). *The evolution of the Christian Church in India*. 1st ed. Cochin: Sooryagatha.

Mathai, P. and Bangert, M. (2019). *Songs as Locus for a Lay Theology. La Vergne*: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Sreedhara Menon, A. (2016). *Kerala History and its makers*. 1st ed. Kottayam: DC Books.

KAINIKARA, D. (2016). *FROM INDUS TO INDEPENDENCE – A TREK THROUGH INDIAN HISTORY*. [Place of publication not identified]: VJ Books (INDIA) PTY LTD.

Zacharia, S. (2005). 'Udayamperoor Sunnahadosinte Kanonakal'. 1st ed. IICS.

PHILIP, J. (2019). *KALTHAPPAM -AN EXCLUSIVE MALANKARA NAZRANI PESAHA TRADITION*. [online] Jeephilip.blogspot.com. Available at: <https://jeephilip.blogspot.com/2016/03/kalthappam-exclusive-malankara-nazrani.html> [Accessed 8 Aug. 2019].

Alexander, G. (2019). *St. Thomas & the Native Judeo-Dravidian Malankara Nasrani Church – A Brief Overview*. [online] Center for Orthodox Studies (COS). Available at: <http://theorthodoxchurch.info/blog/ocrc/st-thomas-the-native-judeo-dravidian-malankara-nasrani-church-a-brief-overview/> [Accessed 8 Aug. 2019].

Source:

OCP-COS

Comment using Facebook

0 Comments

Sort by

Add a comment...

[Facebook Comments Plugin](#)

Related

[COS Declaration on Malankara Nasrani Research Papers](#)
In "COS Articles"

[Malankara Nasranieth, Malankara Moopan and Pallivanaperumal - A Brief Discourse](#)
In "COS Articles"

[St. Thomas & the Native Judeo-Dravidian Malankara Nasrani Church - A Brief Overview](#)
In "COS Articles"

[The Indian Kalamkari Painting of Jesus Christ – A Short Analysis](#)

