



## GENESIS OF CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA

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### **Abstract**

*Christianity had its heritage in India even before Islam touched the porals of India. St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ came to Northern India in about 52A.D. Then he directed his steps to the coast of Coramandal, reached Mylapore where he had his martyrdom. There are many sources regarding the arrival of St. Thomas and his evangelization in India. For his arrival the commercial and political contact of India with the Asian countries and the western world and the trade routes had facilitated. The presence of Malabar Christians in Kerala and the existence of St. Thomas Mount and the tomb of St. Thomas further confirms the arrival of St. Thomas to India.*

**Key Words: Christianity – Sources – Trade Routes - Evangelization – Martyrdom –Western World.**

Remember, St. Thomas came to India when many of the countries of Europe had not yet become Christian and so these Indians who trace their Christianity to him have a longer history and a higher ancestry than those of the Christians of many of the European Countries. And it is really a matter of pride to us that it so happened<sup>1</sup>.

-Dr. Rajendra Prasad.

India was not alien to Christianity. It had tasted it even in the first century A.D. itself. Many think that Christianity entered into India with the advent of the Portuguese in India. But even fifteen centuries before the Portuguese arrival, BharathaVarsha, the cradle of many religions welcomed spontaneously Christianity through St. Thomas.

St Thomas was one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ. Perhaps the best known event in his life is the one from which the phrase:” doubtingThomas”<sup>2</sup> developed. In John (20:19-20), he was not among those disciples to whom the Risen Christ first appeared and when they told the incredulous Thomas – he requested physical proof of resurrection and was fulfilled when Christ reappeared and specifically asked Thomas to touch his wounds. His sudden realization of truth (my lord and My God) made Thomas the first person to explicitly acknowledge Christ’s divinity.

St Thomas evangelized Parthia (Modern Khurasan). Later, Thomas extended his apostolate up to India where he is recognized as the founder of the Church of Syrian – Malabar Christians<sup>3</sup> or Christians of St. Thomas. According to the Acts of Thomas, originally composed in Syria his martyrdom is said to have taken place during the reign of the king of Mylapore at Madras where St. Thomas Mount and San Thome Cathedral- his traditional burial place are still remaining. His relics, however supposedly were taken to the west and finally enshrined at Ortona, Italy.

### **Sources**

There are many sources available regarding the arrival of St. Thomas and his evangelization in India. The testimonies of St. Gregory, Nazianzen, St. Jerome, Theodore, St. Ephraim and St. Ambrose are quite clear and the traces of Christianity found by the Portuguese confirm the fact<sup>4</sup>. Besides the writings of St. Isidore of Seville approve the same. So the Father of Greek and Latin Churches have given us the belief that St. Thomas the Apostle of Christ preached the Gospel in India<sup>5</sup>.

Among others a copper plate engraved with half – obliterated letters was dug up in 1543 and presented Alphonsus de Susa the Portuguese governor<sup>6</sup>. Among other sources mentioned by writers who believe that St. Thomas was in India are coins referring to the king Gondophernes found and an inscription on the Takht-I-Bahi stone now in the Lahore museum. More importance is attached to the mission and martyrdom of St. Thomas in the martyrologies and the liturgical books of the Catholic Church. Very recent discoveries by Father Hostein S.J. throw further light on this important question. The presence of St Thomas Christians in the Malabar Coast also supports the fact of arrival of St. Thomas to India. The existence of St. Thomas Mount in Madras confirms this fact.

The mission of St. Thomas to the court of Gondophernes is described in the Acts of St. Thomas. Other similar writing related to St. Thomas is the Gospel of Thomas.

### **India’s Commercial Contact with the Western World**

From Pre – historic times trade had connected Asiatic countries with the West. According to Rawlinson author of the book entitled “ Intercourse between India and the Western World” the earliest traces of trade along the Persian Gulf route are found in the Cuneiform inscriptions of the Hittite Kings of Mittani in Cappadova belonging to the fourteenth century B. C. The Red Sea route linked India with Arabia, Judea and Egypt. Indian ships plied between Ophir and Western and Indian ports with cargoes of gold, ivory, silver and precious stones<sup>7</sup>.



In the first century B. C. and the first Century A. D. the land and sea routes were controlled by the Romans. Articles of luxury available in India in abundance found a ready market in fashionable Rome. Imperial Roman coins found in the neighbourhood of Coimbatore, Madurai etc, led to the supposition that the Romans operated a mint in the Tamil country to facilitate their local trade here.<sup>7</sup> The Roman coins discovered at Arikamedu near Pondicherry further confirm this fact<sup>8</sup>. Ptolemy, Pliny and Strabo speak about Indian commerce and geography<sup>9</sup>. Gibbon in his work on the Roman Empire wrote that the ransom demanded from the Romans by Alaric included three thousand pounds of pepper which had to come from South India. During the time of Augustus Caesar rice for the use of Roman army was procured from Malabar. It is said that sailors of the Roman Emperor Claudius reached Puhar supposed to be Quilon during the exploratory expedition. There was an unexpected development in maritime communication between India and the West in A.D.45. owing to the discovery of Hippalus of the monsoon winds in the Indian Ocean. The South West monsoon was named Hippalus and when it blew ships could cross the ocean from the Red Sea Coast and reach the coast of India in forty days.

Embassies from South India visited Augustus, Claudius and Julian and Roman merchants regularly visited Malabar ports. The discovery of large quantities of Roman coins of various reigns beginning from that of Augustus in different parts of Malabar proves that Rome – Malabar trade continued unbroken for a long time.

The active trade was not only with the South. It extended from the Southern tip of India to the mouth of Indus in the north. Accounts emphasize principally the mission of ambassadors from Indian kings to the court of Rome. Ambassadors from the Indians of the East brought presents and offered to the Emperor Constantine.

The Red Sea route linked India with Arabia, Judia and Egypt. Indian ships plied between Ophir and the western and Indian ports with cargoes of gold, silver and precious stones. During the period of Persian ascendancy Darius invaded India from Bacteria at present Balk and advanced up to Kasyapapura city on the Gandhara frontier. The Persian army under the leadership of Skylax<sup>10</sup> one of the officers of Darius returned home via the Red Sea route. The invasion of the Punjab by Alexander the Great only intensified the commercial and the political relations between the East and the West.

Egyptians and Asiatic Greeks had a considerable share in the flourishing trade with India and the East. Erastosthenes and other geographers have written accounts of the voyages to the West Coast of India. Much of such information has been incorporated in the works of Strabo of Deodours and of Pliny. It is a result of this connection with Arabia, Egypt and other western countries that Malabar used to have Jewish communities settling in it long before the dawn of Christianity. The boundaries of India had been defined by Megasthenes, Erasthosthenes, Pliny, Ptolemy, Arian, Paul, Orosius, Cosmas and St. Isidore of Seville.

It must be admitted that a personal visit of the Apostle (St. Thomas) to Southern India was feasible in the condition of the time and that there is nothing incredible in the traditional belief that he came by way of Soctra where an ancient Christian community undoubtedly existed. The Indian historian K. MM. Panikkar a non – Christian has expressed the view that it is difficult to deny the truth of the Syrian Christian account of the conversions of St. Thomas on the Malabar Coast.

Politically also India was very much related with the west when on the establishment of the empire of the Achaenids in Iran. Cyrus the great eastern conquests as far as the slopes of Hinduksh on the north-west frontiers of India between 558 and 530 B.C. India was brought into direct contact with Europe when Alexander the Great who over running Iran marched into Punjab to reduce this eastern most province of the Achmenid Empire. On Alexander's death in 323 his greatest general Seleucus Nicator consolidated the remnants and established a dynasty in Syria. In 304 .B.C. when he invaded Punjab it was relieved from Greek rule by Chandra Gupta<sup>11</sup> the founder of the Mauryan Empire. A treaty was cemented by a matrimonial alliance between the Indian king and a Greek princess which paved the way for a long and intimate intercourse between the two courts. Seleucus<sup>12</sup> sent an ambassador named Megasthenes to the court of Chandra Gupta at Pataliputra where he spent a number of years.

Bindusara<sup>13</sup> the son and successor of Chandra Gupta maintained equally friendly relations with Syria. Under Asoka India's Philosopher king, diplomatic relations with the other countries were extended<sup>14</sup>. In the life time of Asoka Bactria and Parthia became independent from the Seleucid Empire. After the death of Asoka, the Mauryan Empire declined as the Indo-Greeks had their days and they too were supplanted by the Indo-Parthians as rulers both in Afghanistan and in the Punjab. The earliest Parthian inscription in Punjab is dated in the year 58 A.D<sup>15</sup>.

Gondaphernes reigned in the first half of the first century A.D. This is a fact of supreme importance of the history of Christianity in India. Because at the division of the world among the apostles of our lord for the purpose of the propagation of the Gospel the kingdom of Gondapherens fell to the lot of St. Thomas. In his missionary journeys the Apostle came to Southern India especially to the Malabar Coast and he closed his earthly career by laying down his life for his Divine Master at Mylapore.



### **Evangelization of St. Thomas in India**

St. Thomas evangelized several Asiatic countries including India moving from one end of the continent to the other. The existence of a strong Christian community in Malabar coasts and the Coramandel coast of India died and was buried at Mylapore. The Malabar Christians always claimed as it is known from historical records that they are the descendants of those converted to Christianity by the Apostle St. Thomas.

Cosmas Indicopleustes (6<sup>th</sup> century) was the first writer who makes mention of existence of Christians in Malabar. About this time the Malabar church had come under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Babylon till the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This Persian Church never denied the Apostolic origin of the Malabar Church the claim of Apostolic origin would not have been tolerated. The Malabar Church therefore is founded by the Apostle St. Thomas.

St. Ambrose has written the following about St. Thomas. "Even those kingdoms which were shut out by rugged mountains became accessible to them as India to Thomas, Persia to Mathew".

St. Jerome also describes about the journey of St. Thomas that he entered the country of the Persian, Caucasus the country of the Albanians, Scythians and Massagetes and then he penetrated into the rich kingdom of India. St. Isidore of Seville mentions that St. Thomas preached the gospel of Christ to the Parthians, the Medes, the Persians, the Hycanians, Bactrians and to the Indians of Oriental region. Likewise St. Gaudentius of Brescia. St. Paulinus of Nola and St. Gregory of Tours bear witness to the contemporary belief that St. Thomas, the Apostle preached in India. In Malabar he preached at Palayur, Kodunganallur, Kottakkavu (Parur), Kokkamangalam, Niranam, Chyal and Kollam. Kodunganallur (Muziris) was the chief port in the kingdom of Keralaputra. Here the Apostle had every facility to preach and make converts to Christ. As tradition attests Kondunganallur became the cradle of Christianity in South India. Palayur and Kottakkavu also were important centers in the first century A.D. The place of his landing at that time and the Church at Maliankara was perhaps the first of the churches built by St. Thomas.

V. NagamAiya, in the Travancore Manual of 1906 writes about the Apostle St. Thomas and his conversion in Malabar in the following vein.

"There is no doubt as to the tradition that St. Thomas came to Malabar and converted a few families of Nambudiris, some of whom are ordained as priests such as those of Shankarapuri and Pakolamattam. For in consonance with this longstanding traditional belief in the minds of the people of the Apostle's mission and labours among the high-caste Hindus, we have before us today the fact that certain Syrian Christian women particularly of a place called Kunnamkolam, wear clothes as Nambudari women do move about screening themselves with huge umbrellas from the gaze of the profane as those women do and will not marry except perhaps in exceptional cases and that too only recently piece of evidence of conduct of the community corroborating the early tradition extant on the coast"<sup>16</sup>

St. Thomas preached the gospel to the Jews in the Malabar Coast and changed their synagogue into a church. This was the cradle of Christianity in India. Very soon the faith was multiplied and the Syrian language was accepted in divine service. St. Thomas after having given a constitution to those infant churches proceeded to new conquests. He directed his steps, to the coast of Coramandel and reached Mylapore.

The Acts of Thomas ascribed to Abdias of Babylon relate that St. Thomas came to Northern India about the year 52 A.D. He was employed as an architect by a certain king Gondaphernes, who entrusted him with the erection of a palace. St. Thomas however built not a material but a spiritual palace for the king by distributing the treasures among the poor to whom he also preached the gospel. The king allowed St. Thomas to preach not only to the Jewish settlers but also to his subjects in general. He seemed to have greatly impressed the local people by his holy life.

### **Martyrdom of St. Thomas**

When St. Thomas directed his steps to the coast of Coramandel and reached Mylapore the fame of his miracles and his wonderful success had preceded him. Raja Mahadeva's eyes were opened to the faith. He received baptism and by his example a part of his subjects embraced the gospel. These numerous conversions excited the hatred and jealousy of the Brahmins two of whom urged the people to stone the Apostle. One of the Brahmin priests observing trace of life in the saint pierced him with his lance and St. Thomas received the reward of his devotion as missionary the crown of Martyrdom. The Remban song and other ancient accounts relate that the Apostle suffered martyrdom at the hands of the Brahmin priests and followers of the pagan religion in Mylapore.

There are important places of the Coramandal Coast associated with the Apostolate and Martyrdom of St. Thomas. They are Mylapore, Little Mount or Chinnamalai and St. Thomas Mount or Peiramalai. It is admitted on all hands that Mylapore has the distinction of being the place where the Apostle converted king Mahadeva, Prince Vijayan and a good many other people, built churches and had his solemn burial in one of the churches built by him. Regarding the actual place of his Martyrdom where he surrendered his soul into the hands of the Supreme Creator opinions differ. Some believe that the martyrdom took



place at Little Mount or Chinnamalai and that was scene of the tragic occurrence. Some others say that only at Periamalai, or St. Thomas Mount, he was spared to death.

One of the most important proofs of the Apostolate and Martyrdom of St. Thomas in India is the tomb of St. Thomas at Mylapore. It is known as Beth Thuma where his relics are treasured. It has been a place of pilgrimage from the last quarter of the first century onwards. According to the Malabar tradition the Martyrdom of St. Thomas took place on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 72 A.D. and soon after the event streams of pilgrims flocked to the Apostle's graveside from all parts of India.

The descendants of the converts of St. Thomas in India used to have special prayers and ceremonies on July 3<sup>rd</sup> to commemorate his death and Martyrdom and the traders and colonies who came from Syria, Mesopotamia and Persia encouraged them in preserving their Rite and Liturgy. They observed the Chaldo- Syrian Rite introduced by the Apostle himself.

It is remarkable that devotion to the Relics of St. Thomas in India did not suffer any diminution even after the major portion of the Relics was removed from Mylapore to Edessa in Mesopotamia. Reference is made to the transportation of the relics of the Apostle from India to Edessa in the Acts of Judas Thomas which were probably composed in Syria between 180 A.D. to 230 A.D.

According to the tradition of St. Thomas built a church at Mylapore with the permission and encouragement of the local king. The present city of Mylapore was originally built south of the church of St. Thomas which was generally known as Beth Thuma or Bethuma. The sacred edifice was repeatedly enriched by royal donations. Raja Bukka of Vijayanager made donation of Mylapore and some territories near the church of S. Thomas.

### **St. Thomas Christians**

St. Thomas Christians is the name of an ancient body of Christians living on the East and the West coasts of Southern India who claim spiritual descent from the Apostle of St. Thomas. They are natives of the land by birth and follow the Syrian rite in their liturgy. They are also called as Syrian Christians of the earliest periods of ecclesiastical history, however it is said that after the death of the Apostle Thomas his disciples remained faithful for a long time and were Zealous in the propagation of the faith. As time went on wars and famines totally dispersed the Christians. Those on the West coast also known as Malabar Coast preserved the faith longer

It must have been to the Malabar Christians that St. Pantaenus of Alexandria was sent. Eusebius says in his "Church History" that St. Pantaenus of Alexandria was active in India about close of the second century A. D. Another reference to these Christians is found in the documents of the Council of Nicaea held in 325. However, it is historically certain that the Malabar Christians fell into the Nestorian heresy in 496. At that time a Nestorian prelate succeeded to the Catholic see of Seleucia in Mesopotamia, under whose jurisdiction these Christians were placed.

The intercourse of the Thomas Christians was made limited by the conquests of the Moslems in the 7<sup>th</sup> century to Mesopotamia where the Nestorian Patriarch would from time to time supply them with prelates.

In 522 A.D. Cosmas visited India and had left a record of his finding of Christians in the Malabar area. And three centuries later the Anglo-Saxon chronicles for the year 883 record that Alfred the Great sent two ambassadors to India with offerings to be deposited at the shrine of St. Thomas. Towards the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Marco Polo visited India and had left records of his visit to the shrine of St. Thomas at Mylapore and about the Christians of India.

In 1321, Friar Jordanus visited Quilon in Malabar and met the Christians who led the memory of St. Thomas with great reverence. In 1330 he was appointed Bishop of Quilon. He brought a letter dated 5<sup>th</sup> April 1330 from Pope John XXII urging the Christians of India to give up their schism and enter the unity of the Catholic Church. Until the arrival of the Franciscan Missionaries about the middle of the sixteenth century this was the condition of the St. Thomas Christians.

The Syrian Church of India emerged into a clear historical light at the time of Vasco da Gama's arrival in Kerala. The links with Persia and Mesopotamia shaped the Christians there into two categories i.e. those who remained constant to their first faith and those who have embraced the doctrines of Rome.

The St. Thomas Christians living along the mountain range had many churches but of those several were seized by the Roman Catholics during the time of the Portuguese. The Syrian Christians resemble the older inhabitants of Malabar in costume but wear more clothing. A veil or cloth is worn above the forehead round the hair. Their dwellings are separate from those of the other inhabitants consisting of hamlets or villages in which they live together the houses being small and mean. It seems that they keep very strict genealogical records and they will neither marry nor in any way intermingle with the new low caste Christians.<sup>17</sup>



Their priests or teachers mostly wear white lines trousers hanging wide over the knee and over them an ample robe of white linen or some other material descending to the knees. On their heads they generally wear a black cup shaped like a sugar loaf. The neck is adorned with a rosary of white coral and in the hand they carry a painted cane much longer than our walking sticks.

Besides their priests the St. Thomas Christians have Bishops who exercise supreme jurisdiction over their churches. At present there are two Bishops Mar Gabriel and Mar Thomas who do not agree well together. Since the St. Thomas Christians are divided into two parties. Romish priests do not fail to take advantage of the circumstances.

Like the smaller Jewish and Moslem communities the Christian Church survived the great Brahmin revival which virtually destroyed Buddhism and Jainism in Kerala. For the Syrian Christians the days of proselytization were over as soon as they accepted this situation. They even underwent a process of Hinduization. Caste rules they applied only slightly less harshly than their Hindu neighbours; a man of a lowly community might be allowed on to the veranda of a Christian home but not into the house itself. They also adopted many customs. For example during the Syrian wedding ceremony the Christian bridegroom follows the Nair custom of tying a thread round the bride's neck and giving her a white cloth which he draps over her head. In the Churches of Kerala hang many-wicked bronze coconut lamps very similar to those used in the Hindu temples and bathing in sacred waters is an important feature of some Christian festivals.

In general, the Syrian Christians were unmolested by the non-Christians of Kerala. At a later period Tippu Sultan destroyed some Christian Churches in Malabar and made a few forcible conversions to Islam but he was an alien from Mysore unaccustomed to Malayali traditions of tolerance. The only known persecution by Hindus was a massacre in 1809 of many Syrian Christians including some priests during Nair rising against the East India Company in fact all evidences suggest that Christians were highly respected by their fellow Malayalis- a respect which continues to this day.

The rural Syrian Christian groups in Kerala are mostly planters and business men with a fairly high standard of living.<sup>18</sup>. The Syrian Christians in fact claim to be of high caste Hindu descent and this claim is admitted by the status within the caste system. Yet during the past five centuries the only Malayalis who have accepted conversion to Christianity have been very low caste Hindus like the fishermen of the Travancore coast who responded to the preaching of St. Francis Xavier and his Jesuit followers.

After analysing the above mentioned facts, it is concluded that Christianity crossed the Jewish frontiers and entered into the Land of the Lotus even in the first century A.D. itself. Christianity had its heritage in India even before Islam touched the portals of India. But the saddest plight is even after twenty centuries of St. Thomas arrival it had not yet fully tasted Christianity. Still the Christians are in minority.

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