The Indian Church of St. Thomas Christians and Her Missionary Enterprises Before the Sixteenth Century

MAR ABRAHAM MATTAM

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Introduction

The Church in India, founded by Apostle St. Thomas, remains an enigma to many. After the Portuguese domination in the seventeenth century this Church was restricted to a small corner of the Malabar Coast in the South and later came to be called the Syro-Malabar Church. So, when one speaks of the Oriental Church in India the impression it creates is often of a Church that was always confined to Malabar, with no roots or rights beyond the South. But what does history tell us about Christianity in India ? Were there no Christian communities in other parts of the country? Did not the Christians try to spread the faith among their countrymen ? While the Buddhist missionaries in India, since the time of Asoka, went round the whole country and even went to distant lands like China, Syria and Egypt, was it possible that the followers of Christ were devoid of the zeal to share the Good News with their neighbours ? Sometimes we hear the accusation against the forefathers, taking a figure from the Gospels, that they had "kept the faith they received under a bushel". Is this criticism justified in the light of history? These questions concerning certain facets

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of the life of the St. Thomas Church had interested me and prompted me to study the subject further. In this article we propose to present the conclusions which may be termed as the result of a preliminary study.

It is considered appropriate to give here a brief history of the Church of Thomas Christians in order that the missionary enterprises of this Church could be viewed against an over all background.

According to well founded tradition St. Thomas came to South India when the Apostles dispersed to different lands to preach the Gospel. Thomas landed in Cranganore on the Malabar Coast around 52 A. D. He made many converts from among the Jews who had settled down in Malabar and among the Hindus, and established churches in several places. Then he moved to the Coromandal Coast on the East where too he preached and finally died a martyr at Mylapore near Madras. Some hold the view that Thomas preached in North West India, in the kingdom of Parthia, before coming to the South.[1]

We have clear evidences of the existence of Jewish colonies in South India, particularly in Malabar, even before the beginning of the Christian era. South India was carrying on regular trade with the Middle East, with Syria and Persia. There was flourishing trade also between India and Greece and Rome. Cranganore (Muziris) was the chief port on the Malabar Coast.

Numerous Roman coins of the early centuries discovered in Malabar and other parts of the country bear witness to the trade relations between India and Rome. To mention a few recent findings, in 1946

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about 80 gold and silver coins were obtained at Eyyal not very far from Cranganore. Several hundred Roman coins were unearthed in a village near North Parur in September 1983.[2] Remains of ancient Roman settlements have been found at a place on the Eastern Coast a few miles North East of Ramanathapuram, in 1983. The main items exported from India were pepper, spices, silk, ivory etc. The Jewish settlements and the close trade relation of South India with the Middle East and Rome paved the way for the arrival of Thomas.

The oldest known document that speaks about the Indian apostolate of St. Thomas is a New Testament apocrypha known as the Acts of Judas Thomas, written probably at Edessa in Syriac, at the end of the second or the beginning of the third century.[3]

Among the ancient writers before the sixth century we have the testimonies of St. Ephrem (d. 373)[4], St. Gregory Nazianzus (d. 389)[5] St. Ambrose (d. 397)[6], St. Gaudentius (d. after 420)[7], St. Paulinus of Nola (d. 431)[8] and St. Jerome (d. 420)[9] regarding the preaching of St. Thomas in India.

The tomb of St. Thomas at Mylapore was a centre of pilgrimage and was venerated by Christians and non-Christians from far and near throughout the centuries. The holy relics of the Saint was transferred to Edessa in the second or third century. St. Ephrem's famous hymns to St. Thomas refer to his martyrdom in India and the translation of his relics to Edessa.[10]

It is believed that St. Thomas ordained a few priests and Bishops from among the newly converted

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to govern the communities of faithful. This line of episcopacy continued for a few centuries. But we do not possess any definite information.[11]

From very early times the Church in India was in close contact with the Mesopotamian or Persian Church. Eventually when the Churches became organized the Indian Church came under the Persian Patriarchate. Thereafter usually Bishops were sent for the Church in India from the Persian Church. Perhaps this was the case from the fifth century.[12]

The Thomas Christians eventually accepted the Mesopotamian or East Syrian liturgy. For this reason they are also called Syrians.

The Church in India was kept in isolation for several centuries without any contact with Rome and the Persian Church when the land and sea routes from India fell under the sway of Muslim invaders, who were enemical to the Christians. Anyhow intermitently we see Bishops coming to India from Persia.

A new chapter in the history of the Church in India began with the coming of Latin missionaries from Europe in the sixteenth century. The first to come were the Portuguese. The Thomas Christians received with joy their co-religionists and there was friendly relation between them for some time. But before long troubles started. The Latin Diocese of Goa was erected in 1539 which was raised to an Archdiocese in 1558 with Cochin as its suffragan. The Portuguese authorities interfered with the liturgy, the customs and the administration of the Thomas Christians.

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In 1556 Mar Joseph was sent by the Chaldean Patriarch Abdiso, with letters from the Pope, as Metropolitan of India for the Thomas Christians. But when he arrived in India he was arrested by the Portuguese and detained for eighteen months and subjected to the Inquisition of Goa. He was forced to accept many Latin liturgical usages. After him came Mar Abraham who too met with the same fate. He was imprisoned and deported to Portugal. But he managed to escape. He went to the Patriarch and then to Rome. With the approval of the Pope he was assigned the Metropolitan See of Angamally in 1567 to rule over the Thomas Christians throughout India. He had to suffer much at the hands of the Portuguese Prelates till his death in 1597.

At the death of Mar Abraham, Archbishop Dom Menezes of Goa usurped the authority over the Thomas Christians. He convened the infamous "Synod" of Diamper in 1599 and forced upon the Thomas Christians many Latin customs and regulations. Thereafter the Padroado (Patronage of the Portuguese king) Latin jurisdiction was imposed on the Syrian Christians and Dom Francis Roz S. J. was appointed Bishop over them. The See of Angamally was suppressed.

Agrieved by the policy of the Latin Prelates and missionaries a group of Thomas Christians under the leadership of the Archdeacon assembled at Mattancherry near Cochin in 1653 and swore that henceforth they would not be subject to the Jesuit Prelate and Jesuits. It was not a revolt against Rome but only against the Jesuit missionaries. After a few months they met at Alangad. Some priests conducted a ceremony at which

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they imposed hands on the Archdeacon, who was only a priest, and proclaimed him as Archbishop Mar Thomas I. The people were made to believe that the priests were authorised to do so by the Pope. Mar Thomas I was excommunicated by Archbishop Garcia S. J. in 1665 and many of his followers left him.

When the Archdeacon Mar Thomas failed to obtain Chaldean Rite Bishops and get validly ordained he approached the Jacobite Patraiarch of Antioch who came to his help and sent Jacobite Bishops to India. The successors of Mar Thomas I were also natives. Gradually they accepted Jacobite faith and Antiochean liturgy. Some of them wanted to be reconciled with Rome and sent petitions to the Pope. But the terms and conditions laid down by Rome, relying on the reports of the Latin missionaries, were hard and unacceptable.

The other group of Thomas Christians, who were the majority, continued under the Latin Prelates. They were sending appeals to Rome one after another to obtain Bishops of their own Rite and nationality. But their voice was too feeble to be heard in distant Rome. The influence of the Latin missionaries and the king of Portugal prevailed against them.

At long last, almost after three centuries, Rome erected three Vicariates under the Propaganda Congregation exclusively for the Thomas Christians and three among them were appointed Bishops to these Sees. In 1923 the Syro-Malabar Hierarchy was instituted by Pope Pius XI with Ernakulam as the metropolis and three suffragans.

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Still the jurisdiction of the Hierarchy was restricted to a small area between the Pampa and Bharathapuzha rivers, which is only one third of Malabar or Kerala. In 1950 the jurisdiction was extended to cover more areas in South India. Subsequently some of the Dioceses were divided and new ones created.

Between 1962 and 1984 eight new Mission Dioceses were erected in Central and North India and entrusted to the Syro-Malabar Church for the work of evangelization.

Under the leadership of Archbishop Mar Ivanios an Orthodox Metropolitan a section of the Orthodox and Jacobites reunited with Rome in 1930. The Malankara Catholic Hierarchy was established for them. They follow the Antiochean liturgy. Statistics show a steady increase in their number. They have now three Eparchies. Trivandrum, Tiruvalla and Bethery and five Metropolitans. Archbishop Benedict Mar Gregorios is the Malankara Metropolitan and Head of all the Malankara Catholics with about 2,70,000 faithful. There are some 320 diocesan priests, 160 men religious (priests and Brothers) and 880 women religious and 700 parishes and Mission stations.

Meanwhile the whole territory of India was divided into Latin Dioceses. Now the Latins object to the expansion of the jurisdiction of the Oriental Thomas Christians on the plea that it will cause overlapping or double jurisdictions!

At present the Thomas Christians of the Syro-Malabar Church have two Metropolitan Archdioceses and 16 Dioceses. The number of faithful is about 2,878,000.

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There are approximately 2050 diocesan priests, 1180 religious priests and 280 religious brothers. Religious women are more than 16,850. Besides about 2,300 priests and 9,200 sisters are working in Latin Missions all over India.

There is a belief, especially among Western authors, that the Thomas Christians were Nestorians. This calls for a brief explanation. One important aspect to be borne in mind in this regard is that the Church in India was not involved in any of the Christological controversies and did not take any particular stand supporting any heretical views. Some of their liturgical books contained formulas which were not perhaps orthodox, but this does not mean that they accepted knowingly anything against the Catholic faith. We should take into account the special circumstances of time and place. The Thomas Christians were cut off from Rome and other Churches for centuries, and they were not aware of the developments in the Church outside.[13]

The acknowledged exponent of the teaching of the East Syrian Church was Mar Babai the Great (d. 628). Several authors who have examined afresh the Christology of this Church are of opinion that there is nothing in it heretical or against faith.[14]

The allegation of heresy was to some extent due to the misunderstanding of Syriac terms like "kiana" "qnoma" "parsopa" etc. which have different connotations from the Greek ousis, phusis, prosopon and hypostasis and the Latin terms natura, persona and hypostasis.

With regard to the Council of Ephesus which condemned Nestorius, the nature of the Council was not

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clear to all. It was convened by the Emperor. The Bishops of the East Syrian Church did not attend the Council as they were in the Persian Empire. The details of the Acts of the Council were known to the Persian Church only after many years. At the Council itself there were group rivalries. Under these circumstances the East Syrians considered it only as a local Synod.

The Primacy of the Roman Pontiff was acknowledged by the East Syrian and Indian Church. This is clear from the so called Nicean or Arabic canons which they accepted.[15]

Finally we shall quote what the present Holy Father said about the Church of St. Thomas on 29th August 1980. Pope John Paul II received in audience the Bishops of the Syro-Malabar and Malankara Churches who had come Rome for the ad limina visit. The following Sunday the Holy Father spoke to those assembled at the Angelus at Castel Gondolfo:

"During the past few days I had the joy to receive the Indian Bishops of the Malabar Rite who had come together with Cardinal Parecattil for the visit "ad limina Apostolorum" to bear eloquent testimony of the vitality of their 18 Dioceses.

"This is a church of one of the most ancient tradition sprouted by the preaching of Apostle Thomas and in fact the Malabar faithful have always been known by the title "Christians of St. Thomas".

"It is the glory of this Church that it had never been separated from union with Rome, in a continuity which the enormous geographical distance could not break".[16]

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The Indian Church of St. Thomas and Her Missionary Enterprises Before The Sixteenth Century

It is now generally accepted that the Malabar Coast was evangelised by Apostle St. Thomas and that he established churches in several places in Kerala, particularly in those centres where there were Jewish colonies at that time and that the Church has had an unbroken existence in this region. So we pass over the question of the origin of Christianity in India. We are exploring here to what extent Christianity was spread in the country and to what extent the Church in India was instrumental in spreading the Christian faith in India and in the countries outside. Extensive research and in-depth study are required in order to give a full and comprehensive answer to these questions. But there are positive evidences already available to show that the Church in India was from the beginning zealous in spreading the message of Christ and had actually sent out missionaries to different parts of the country as well as to countries beyond the Indian borders.

A careful study of the documents and other evidences before us lead us to the following firm conclusions :

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1. The Church was fairly wide-spread all along the Western and Eastern Coastal Regions of India.

2. Christian communities had existed, though perhaps sparsely, on the main-land including Central India.

3. Indian Christian missionaries had carried the Gospel to different parts of the country.

4. Indian missionaries had spread the faith to China, Maldives and other neighbouring countries.

I. COASTAL REGIONS

From Sind to Cape Comorin

We have a very valuable and authentic source of information about the state of Christianity in India and some other countries towards the middle of the sixth century. It is the famous work of Cosmas Indicopleustes known as Topographia Christiana. Cosmas was an Alexandrian merchant who travelled widely and came to India between 520 and 525 A. D. Sometime later he embraced monastic life. He narrates in the book his experiences during the travels and he has been called Indicopleustes meaning Indian voyager. He writes: "Even in the island of Taprobane (Ceylon) in inner India where the Indian Sea is, there is a Church of Christians with clergy and a congregation of believers... And such also is the case in the land called Male (Malabar) where the pepper grows. And in the place called Kalliana there is a bishop appointed from Persia, as well as in the island of Dioscoris (Socotra), in the same Indian Sea... And so likewise, among the Bactrians and Huns and Persians, and the rest of Indians, and among the Persarmenians and Greeks and

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Elamites, and throughout the whole land of Persia, there is an infinite number of churches with bishops, and a vast multitude of Christian people, and they have many martyrs and recluses leading a monastic life".[1]

About Ceylon Cosmas adds: "This is the great island in the ocean, lying in the Indian Sea. By the Indians it is called Sieladiba but by Greeks, Taprobane. In it is found the hyacinth stone. It lies on the other side of the pepper country".[2]

Cosmas, therefore, attests that there were Christians and their churches in Ceylon, Malabar, Kalliana and Socotra in the sixth century. Kalliana is considered to be Kalyan near Bombay. Moreover, in Kalyan there was a bishop, he says, who was appointed from Persia.

The addition of the words, "and the rest of Indians" is of great significance. From this it is clear that there were Christians in other parts of India, too.

Dr. A. Mingana, a scholar and historian of repute, makes the following observation about the testimony of Cosmas: "Cosmas text is important not only as regards the existence of Christian communities in Bombay (Kalliana), Malabar and Ceylon, but also and especially by the addition of the significant sentence: 'and the rest of the Indians".[3]

Fr. Hosten, in his book 'Antiquities from San Thome and Mylapore' elaborates on what Cosmas wrote:" There appears to have existed in pre-Portugese India an

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almost unbroken line of Christian settlements from Sind down to Cape Comorin and Mylapore...We should think there were Christians in each of the places of trade mentioned by Cosmas between Sind and the Fishery Coast: Sindhu, Orrhotha, Kalliana, Sibor, and the five marts of Male or the pepper country: Parti, Mangaruth, Salopatana, Nalopatana, Pudopatana; also away from Sieldiba (Ceylon), at Marollo and Kaber (Kaveripatanam)".[4]

Sindhu is to be identified with Sind; Orrhotha with Sorath or Surath. Mangaruth is Mangalore.

Thana and Gujarat

It was in the year 1321 A.D. that Jordan of Severac of the Order of Friars Preachers (Dominicans) arrived at Thana, near Bombay, along with four Franciscan Friars bound for China. Before coming to India Jordan had worked for several years in the Middle East Missions and had the opportunity to learn the Persian language. When Jordan reached India he found Christian communities living in Thana and Supera, and Paroco in Gujarat. His Franciscan companions were martyred at Thana soon after their arrival. At Supera there was an ancient church said to have been built by St. Thomas himself, which was destroyed by the pagans. The Christians had re-built it and it was in this church that Jordan buried the Franciscan martyrs.[5]

Jordan spent about seven years in missionary activity on the Konkan Coast and went back to Europe in 1328. There he was nominated Bishop of Columbum (Quilon), the first Latin Rite Prelate in India. He wrote

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his renowned work, Mirabilia Descripta, in which he gives a description of India and the Middle East. He returned to India, but according to all indications, he was stoned to death at Thana, before he could take possession of his See of Quilon.

A Dominican historian, Fr. Andre' Marie gives the following account of Jordan's martyrdom: "Brother Jourdain still coveted martyrdom: This favour was granted him: he died at Thana, stoned by the infidels, we do not know in what year".[6]

Fr. Hosten thinks that Jordan was martyred in 1330 A.D. or soon after that: "The date of the martyrdom of Friar Jordanus should fall in 1330 or later. We know that in 1330 Friar Jordanus, then created first Latin Bishop of Quilon, was on the point of setting out for the East".[7]

GOA

Goa had been a home of St. Thomas Christians long before the coming of the Portuguese. Crosses with equal-size arms, sometimes called the Persian cross, which are found there bear witness to the early existence of Christianity on the island. Rev. Dr. Hubert Mascarenhas, a well known philologist and scholar, a Goan by birth, narrates a story about the fate of these crosses of which he had heard as a child from his grandmother. He says: "One of the many "apocryphal" stories I heard from my grandmother was the popular one about the stone-carved, equal-arm cross near our house on the hill, without any image on it which the local villagers used to hide away when the

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Portuguese soldiers came looking for "heretics". I used to ask: Why did we hide that cross? and she used to tell me: These equal-arm crosses were sacred to the Nazarenes; but the Portuguese used to look upon them as Nestorian symbols. She told me that the many Nazareth surnames in Nasraua-Villa (today: Nachnola near Aldona) were named after our Lord Jesus of Nazareth. This was a deeper nail for my little head. The Portuguese or Latin cross with its longer vertical bar was considered in our churches and chapels as the only orthodox symbol".[8]

Ibn Battuta who passed through Goa in 1342 A.D. speaks of a Christian settlement near Goa.[9]

St. Francis Xavier landed in Goa on 6th May, 1542. About four months after that, in September, he wrote to his confreres in Rome his impressions of Christianity in Goa. "It is four months and more since we arrived in India, at Goa, which is a city totally of Christians- a sight to be seen".[10]

In another letter to St. Ignatius written on the same date he speaks about the great devotion of the Christians of Goa to St. Thomas and requests him to obtain from the Holy Father the grant of plenary indulgence for the faithful on the occasion of the feast of the Apostle: "The first thing that I beg for in the service of Our Lord Jesus Christ is, on the ground that the people of this land are greatly devoted to the glorious Apostle St. Thomas, who is the patron of the whole of India; for the increase of the devotion of all these devotees that His Holiness the Pope should grant a plenary indulgenece, on the feast day of St. Thomas and its octaves."[11]

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These letters are very revealing. As Fr. Mascarenhas argues, it was not yet 45 years since the Portuguese had conquered Goa; Francis Xavier was there for less than five months. Could it be possible that the entire population of the city became Christians in so short a time? How is it that they were so devoted to St. Thomas? They could not have inherited this devotion from the Portuguese, for they were not specially devoted to the Saint. To quote Fr. Mascarenhas: "St. Francis could not leave Goa by sea or land till the monsoon storms had stopped. For him, "Goa" was indeed India. How could he urgently and unequivocally describe all these as devotees of St. Thomas, if it was he who had baptized them all–and remember he speaks of the city being "totally of Christians"–and remember how could they all be devoted to St. Thomas, if they were not already St. Thomas Christians in the most literal sense? This kind of devotion to St. Thomas existed and exists nowhere in Spain or Portugal or in any part of the world, except in India".[12]

Further Fr. Mascarenhas speaks about a community living in Goa known by the name Thomse. They are Hindus. They celebrate their biggest religious festival of the year which they call Dhukrana around July 3rd. It sounds like Dhukrana in Syriac which signifies the feast of the remembrance of the martyrdom of St. Thomas.

A colony of these Thomse people is found close to Kalyanapuram near Mangalore. Among them there are both Hindus and Christians. The Thomse Hindus go on a pilgrimage every year to Kalapura (Kalyanapuram) in Goa around July third, according to the full moon of the lunar Calendar.

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Fr. Mascarenhas is of the opinion that the Thomse people were all Thomas Christians or followers of St. Thomas and that they fled from Goa or gradually drifted to Hinduism being subjected to harassment and persecution by the Portuguese as heretics. [13]

Mysore and Vijayanagar

Ancient granite crosses have been discovered at Anekal and nearby places and they prove that there were Christian communities in olden days, in the interior of Mysore. [14]

Vijayanagar was a powerful kingdom in the South, comprising most of the Decan and Dravidic South. Abd-en-Razzak who visited India in 1442 says that the Vizier (Prime Minister) of Vijayanagar at that time was a Christian named Nimeh-Pezir. [15]

Diogo de Couto, the Portuguese historian, tells us that Crisna Rao of Narsinga (Vijayanagar) who reigned for thirty years and fought against Sultao Hemed of Delhi had a great number of Christians in his army: "And because this Crisna Rao had in his army a great number of Christians, of those whom St. Thomas made and who were his Vassals, Ruy Gonsalves de Clavijo heard that that king was a Christian and this he affirms in his Itinerary."[16]

Mangalore

We have mentioned above that Mangaruth was one of the trading centres visited by Cosmas Indicopleustes which possibly had a Christian settlement.

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Thome' Lopez writes that the Christians of Mangalore sent a deputation to Vasco da Gama on his second voyage, towards the end of 1502. This, again, confirms that there were Christians in the region from an earlier date. [17]

Cape Comorin

From ancient times Cape Comorin was an important trading centre frequented by Romans and Greek merchants. Near the Cape, at Kumari Muttam, there was a church called Thomaypally, a church dedicated to Thomas. The Portuguese historian Duarte Barosa, who stayed in Malabar for about 16 years gives us some information about this church. He wrote around A. D. 1514. "Near this Cape Comorin is an old church of Christians which was founded by Armenians (Arameans or Syrians), who still have it and celebrate Christian Masses within it and have crosses on the altars. All voyagers pay tribute to it, and the Portuguese offer Mass in it when they pass through there". [18]

The Eastern Coast

At Mylapore and all along the Coromandal Coast there were Christian communities from very early times. To quote Fr. Hosten: "Christian communities existed in the first centuries, not only at Mylapore, but further South down to Cape Comorin and in Malabar". [19]

Kaveripattanam, Vaipur, Vembar etc. were inhabited by St. Thomas Christians. [20]

As late as 1348 A. D. the steelyard for pepper and spices in Mylapore were in the hands of the Thomas Christians. [21]

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Nicolo de Conti was an Italian merchant who visited India several times between 1415 and 1438. He says there were about one thousand Christians then living in Mylapore, though he calls them Nestorian heretics: "Here the body of Saint Thomas lies honourably buried in a large and beautiful church, it is venerated by heretics, who are called Nestorians, and inhabit this city to the number of a thousand". [22]

II. MAIN LAND AND CENTRAL INDIA

Sind - Punjab

Along with Dr. Farquhar, many modern scholars hold the view that St. Thomas, before coming to India, preached in Thakshasila (Taxila) in Sind and founded the Church, during the reign of Gundapher. Taxila was a great centre of trade and a common meeting place for merchants and scholars from Greece, Rome, the Mediterranian countries and India. [23]

We possess several references to the Church in Sind in the early centuries. Probably the Church had flourished there until the Muslim occupation of the region. Of the Church in Sind Msgr. Zalaeski writes: "The fruit of St. Thomas' preaching were those great Christian communities of Sind, mentioned by St. John Damascene, who says that 'at the time when the disciples of St. Paul and St. Antony flourished in the desert of Thebaida, a great number of Indian anchorites imitated their example, and in a desert not far from the Indus led lives of astonishing sanctity and austerity'. He mentions amongst them St. Barlaam whose feast the Church celebrates on the 27th November. Monastic life was also developed and several Bishops governed that faithful flock." [24]

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An Arab traveller makes mention of the Christians in Sind in the thirteenth century: "Caimur, a town of India near Sindia (Sind), whose inhabitants are noted for perfect beauty, being descended from Indians and Turks. There are Muslims, Christians, Jews and Magi (Parsis). In the town there are Muhammedic temples, churches and synagogues; there is also a temple of fire-worshippers." [25]

In 1940 Rev. R. D. Trotter, a Protestant missionary, came across a Fakir cammunity at Tatta, in Sind, which call themselves Barthomai, i. e. sons or followers of Thomas. They claim that they are descendents of Christians baptised by St. Thomas. This is what Trotter writes; "To support the contention that the apostle St. Thomas came to Sind, there is a Fakir community living in Tatta, which has occasionally revealed itself. This Fakir group, to all appearences Hindu, calls its small community by an Aramaic name, something like Barthomai, the sons of Thomas, and claims that it is descended from Christians baptised by St. Thomas himself and that in their secret society they own books and relics to support their position, Unfortunately no outsider, either Indian or European, has had access to the archives of this society, and individual members are as hard as the Indian Lion." [26]

Patna

In Witsch's Geography and statistics of the Church Patna is mentioned as the seat of a metropolitan in A. D. 1222.[27] Some maps are also found where Patna is marked as a metropolitan See.[28]

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This assertion should be weighed in the light of the unique position Patna or Pataliputra held from ancient times. Among the Greek and Latin writers the city was known as Palibothra or Palimbothra. It was the capital of the Mauriyan Empire, which during the reign of Asoka, (273–236 B. C.) comprised the whole of North India and a major part of the South. At the time of Chandragupta Maurya, Seleucus who founded his dynasty in Persia sent to Pataliputra Megasthenes as his ambassador. Bindusara the son and successor of Chandragupta had friendly relations with Syria. Asoka, his son, extended his diplomatic relations to Egypt, Macedonia, Cyrene etc.[29] There was a Royal High-Way connecting Pataliputra and Taxila. The internationally known Nalanda University, which attracted students and scholars from all over the Buddhist world was situated near Patna. In the seventh century A. D., during the reign of Harsha, the University had more than ten thousand students and it continued to flourish until the 12th century. Pataliputra maintained its prominence for several centuries.[30]

Viewed against this background of the close contact between Pataliputra, Syria and Persia, it is clear that Christians from Persia and various parts of India must have settled down in this capital city. The Patriarch of Babylon could easily establish an archbishopric and send a Bishop there.

Orissa–City of Butifilis

There is an old map, known as the Catlan map, dated 1375 where Butifilis is marked as a Christian city, ruled by King Stephen. With an indication to a place

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in Orissa, the map contains a note which reads: "Here reigns King Stephen, a Christian. In this land lies St. Thomas. Look for the city of Butifilis." The identity of the place offers some difficulty. Since it is stated "In this land lies St. Thomas" Mylapore might have been in the kingdom of Stephen, or the author did not know the exact position of Mylapore.[31]

Colonel Yule calls it Mutifilis, instead of Butifilis, and thinks it is Mutifilis or the present Mutapali further South and identifies it with Mutifili of Marco Polo, which Polo says is a Kingdom about one thousand miles North of Malabar.[32]

According to John Stewart, Butifilis is in Orissa near Cuttack. This is what Stewart writes: "... and in an old map (called the Catalan map) dated 1375, there is found a note referring apparently to a place in the Province of Orissa, as follows: 'Here reigns K. Stephen, a Christian. Look for the city of Butifilis.' Butifilis is near modern Cuttack, but Yule calls it Mutifilis and places it much further South, near Vizakapatanam, or between it and Masulipatanam—a town several hundred miles North of Madras."[33]

Christian Kingdoms in Central India

Marco Polo, the great Venetian traveller, who visited India about 1293 says that there were at that time in Middle or Central India six kingdoms, out of which three were ruled by Christian kings: and moreover, the greatest of the six was a Christian king. In his own words: "Abash is a very great Province, and you must know that it constitutes the Middle India; and it is on the main-land. There are in it six great kings with six

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great kingdoms; and of these six kings there are three that are Christians; and three that are Saracens; but the greatest of all the six is a Christian and all the others are subject to him." Marco Polo goes on to mention that St. Thomas preached in this region and then went to Maabar (Coromandal Coast) where he died: "St. Thomas the Apostle preached in this region and after he had converted the people he went away to the Province of Maabar, where he died, and there his body lies."[34]

Marco Polo distinguishes India the Greater, India the Lesser and Middle India. Some authors think Middle India is not India proper, but the region comprising Arabia, Abyssinia etc. and so they translate Abash as Abyssinia. But other authors are of the opinion that Middle India refers to Central India proper. We can not, therefore, rule out the possibility of these kingdoms being in the Central region of the Indian Subcontinent.[35]

Chronicon, seu Liber Historia Plurimae, attributed to the Franciscan John Elemosina (1336) also mentions the Christians of Middle India and their Nestorian monarch.[36]

Church of Udaipur in Malwa Kingdom

At the XXII International Congress of Orientalists held in Rome in 1899, Baron Textor de Ravisi, member of the Asiatic Society of Paris and a former Governor of Karikal read a paper dealing with a mural inscription found on a temple in Udaipur, near Sagar, in East Malwa. Fr. Burthey S. J. of the Madurai Mission had earlier deciphered the inscription, which was in some

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form of Pali language. But a certain Hindu, Kamalakantha by name, had made a different version, adapted to his views, without any reference to Christian religion. Baron Textor in his discourse challenged the version of Kamalakantha and endeavoured to show the Christian origin of the writings. His discourse at the Congress was published in Catholic Register of Madras, in its issue dated October 1, 1915, and in The Examiner of November 27, and December 4, 1915.

According to the translation of Fr. Burthey, the present temple was once a church of the ancient community of St. Thomas Christians. For more than four centuries, Christianity was in a state of decline in the region and the church was in ruins, before it was rebuilt by King Sangai Vardaha in the year 1110 of Vikrama era, which corresponds to A. D. 1060. The church was dedicated to Blessed Virgin Mary. The following paragraphs are quoted from the introductory part of the inscription: "As this temple was one of the first to be erected and has been restored with the greatest care, involving immense labour and has been built according to the rules of a most beautiful architecture and becomes the joy of all the countries of the Sabeans, and that the favours received through the Mother of God have made it from ancient times a place of exceptional celebrity, here is what remains to us to relate:

"Nine centuries had rolled by since the glory and mercy of the Uncreated, the Divine Orient, the Man God, Christ, descended on the earth and also that, after having laid down the weight of His mortality He entered upon the possession of His glory and after His

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Holy Apostle (St. Thomas, Nadattigam Buddha) arrived among us, we should say, according to the era of Emperor Vikrama 1116 years, (A. D. 1060), the new era, which ought to be given here together with the one which marks the nine centuries.

But after this time He who carried upon His shoulders the cross—the conqueror of His enemies became our peace, one records 981 years (A. D. 1080). It was during this time that, all darkness being dispelled, and the sovereign power of the Divine conqueror making art and virtue flourish. The Divine Orient (ondayadittya) was recognised as the master of all the aciences and the King of Kings.

"But in course of time the souls began to incline towards the earth and this so great splendour of science and virtue disappeared. Heresies sprang up and men given up to the use of the Kanja (kanja or Kanya is the opium and chamra which one chews and smokes in order to get inebriated) having prevailed the whole empire was filled with trouble. A period of 446 years has elapsed since the commencement (A.D. 814) of these evils".[37]

The inscription gives a short account of the Consecration of the church and a summary of the prayers. The names of the reigning kings of the period, in the neighbouring kingdoms, are also given.

About the Communion service at the end of the Sacrifice or Holy Mass it is recorded: "The celebrant being unable to distribute sufficiently quickly the particles of Divine Fire to the disciples, twenty other priests joined him and the distribution was quickly done to

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those who had been able to enter the Holy place. Soon after, this first gathering left the temple, and those who, not being communicants, had remained outside, having now entered to adore God, a second service was begun and gone through them.

"It was found that these last numbered exactly 4160 people, and that those of the first service, who had gone out to give them room, were not less than 4339."

"But no one could count the number of those to whom was granted the favour of hospitality, nor the good works of all sorts that were done."

In 1981, the present writer made a visit to Udaipur. There is a magnificent temple, apparently of the 10th or 11th century. Nearby there are some partly ruined edifices. Several inscriptions are found on the walls of the temple. A long slab of stone with inscriptions, broken and much damaged, was left in the courtyard. Whether this is the temple referred to by Baron Texton and Fr. Burthey is not certain. At first sight there is nothing visible to suggest that it was a church. Some writings on the wall appeared to be in syriac. I did not have the opportunity for a close examination. A Pujari who is looking after the temple objected to my examining the interior of the temple and some ruined portions collected outside.

I was told, there are a few tombstones with crosses marked on them, in a cemetery at Seronj about fifty five km away from Udaipur. So I proceeded to Seronj. There is an old cemetery covering several acres. Now it is being used as a burial ground by the Muslims.

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Seronj comes under the Diocese of Sagar. The C.M.I. Fathers have purchased some land adjacent to the cemetery, and opened a mission station there.

On three grave stones there are clear signs of crosses engraved, with some writings. The characters looked like Armenian. Photographs of these were taken, and through a friend, they were sent to two Armenian scholars for deciphering. The efforts were not altogether vain.

It was confirmed that the inscriptions on the tombstones were in Armenian. The writings on one of the stones was deciphered as follows: "This is the grave of Aghamal son of Malkhas of the date 1153". The translator said that the date 1153, corresponds to A. D. 1704, since there is a difference of 551 years between the Christian and the Armenian eras.

But another Armenian scholar gave a slightly different version. According to him, it read: "This is the tomb of Martiros son of Ahkamali Date 1000-10-3." The year (Armenian) was 1000, the numbers 10 and 3 indicated either month or date respectively. Akhamali is even today the name of persons (male) in Armenia. Martiros is also a proper name (masculine) in use up to the present times.

Anyhow, it is evident that there were in that region Oriental Armenian Christians, at least about three centuries ago. Were these Armenians merchants? Was there any connection between the church at Udaipur and these Christians? All these need be further investigated.

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Christians all over India

Nicolo de Conti who visited India during the first quarter of the 15th century attests that Christians were found all over India as the Jews were scattered in Italy or Europe: "Here the body of Saint Thomas lies honourably buried in a large and beautiful church; it is venerated by heretics, who are called Nestorians, and inhabit this city to the number of a thousand. These Nestorians are scattered over all India, as the Jews among us". Further about the custom of polygamy prevailing in India Conti says that the Nestorians who are spread over the whole of India are the only exception: "The inhabitants of Central India are only allowed to marry one wife; in the other parts of India polygamy prevails very generally, excepting among those Christians who have adapted the Nestorian heresy, who are spread over the whole of India".[38]

Friar Oderic of Pordenone who came to Mylapore around A.D. 1323 found there only fifteen Christian houses He attributes another select epithet for them: "Vile and pestilent heretics". "... there are some fifteen houses of Nestorians; that is to say, Christians, but vile and pestilent heretics."[39] Perhaps it was enough for him to see the Persian crosses in the church to consider them as heretics. Besides, their mode of worship was different from that of the Latin Church; those who did not conform to Latin ways were heretics and schismatics".

It is a paradox to see what the Portuguese were writing later about the scandal their own Catholics were giving by their immoral way of life, to the Hindus

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and local Christians. Witnessing what was happening, the Bishop of Dume, who was sent to Goa wrote: "I saw in Goa, and I also know it for certain in Cochin that many a wife is separated from her husband with false witnesses...giving bad example to the people of the country who are Christians".[40]

Friar Vincente Leguna wrote to the king of Portugal in 1530: "Many of the fidalogos here live publicly in a state of fornication. Every time I preach, I tell them what I feel, and this (their way of life) is little service done to God and to you. This state of affairs must be remedied. Again, married men here take their slaves for fornication, and for this reason there is great dissoluteness among the Christians".[41]

In Various Kingdoms

Le Quien quotes Ludovicus Gusmanus, a Portuguese Jesuit, who says that there were hundreds of thousands of Christians in India scattered in various kingdoms, and that they had their own Archbishop, bishops and priests: "Multi in India Christiani sunt quorum numerus ultra centum quinquaginta millia excurrit, per varia regna divisi, diversis regibus Gentilium et Maurorum subjecti reperiuntur. Habent ii suum archiepiscopum, episcopos et sacerdotes".[42]

On the Banks of the Ganges

Osorius and Jarricus speak of numerous Nestorian communities on the River Ganges, and in Central and East India, as quoted by Assemani.[43]

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Jawaharlal Nehru on Christianity in India

In 1931 Jawaharlal Nehru visited Kerala and he came across the Christian communities and churches in some places. About this visit he writes in his autobiography: "We also visited, along the backwaters of Malabar, some of the towns inhabited chiefly by Christians belonging to the Syrian churches. Few people realise that Christianity came to India as early as the first century after Christ, long before Europe turned to it, and established a firm hold in South India. Although these Christians have their religious head in Antioch or somewhere in Syria, their Christianity is practically indigenous and has few outside contacts.

"To my surprise, we also came across a colony of Nestorians in the South; I was told by their bishop that there were ten thousand of them. I had laboured under the impression that the Nestorians had long been absorbed in other sects, and I did not know that they had ever flourished in India. But I was told that at one time they had a fairly large following in India, extending as far North as Benares". [44]

Nehru was aware of the apostolic origin of Christianity in India. What he was told about the spread of the Christian faith in the country, namely, that there was once a flourishing Church, extending from Malabar up to the Ganges is a credible statement, corroborated by several authors as we have seen.

All India Church

From all that have been said above, it is sufficiently clear that there were Christian communities not

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only in Malabar, not only on the Western and Eastern Coasts of India, but also in many other parts of the country from the early centuries.

Therefore, the church that had existed in India, was not just a Malabar Church, but an All–India Church. Malabar Church or Syro–Malabar Church is in fact a mis–nomer. The head of the Church was rightly called "Metropolitan and the Gate of All–India" (Metropolita ū tharaā d kolla Hendo)[45]. But from the 17th century the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan, and thereby that of the Church of St. Thomas Christians, was restricted to a corner of the South in Malabar. This was a gross injustice done to the Oriental Church in India.

III. THE WORK OF INDIAN MISSIONARIES

Now, there remains an important question. If Christianity was widely spread in India, and we have found it was, who were the missionaries that worked hard for the spread of the Christian faith here? The Christians were numerous and not confined to a few pockets in the country. They were not foreign traders or foreign settlers. Indian Christians themselves had preached the faith to their brethren. This is the clear conclusion we arrive at. We know that the Church in India was organised under the Patriarch of Babylon and that Persian or Syrian monks went everywhere in the East to preach. Some of these monks must have come to this subcontinent also for missionary work to assist the native Christians.

Bishop Joseph de Soledade and some Latin missionaries wrote to Rome towards the end of the 18th

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century, between 1773 and 1786, making several accusations against the Thomas Christians, and arguing their case for the continued rule of the foreign Latin bishops over the Syrian Church in India. In their letters it was said that "in the absence of the missionaries, the non-Christians will not become Christians, so there will be no more conversions." [46]

Fr. Thomman Paremakkal, who accompanied Mar Joseph Kariattil to Rome and Lisbon, refuting these accusations writes in Varthamanapusthakam: "What shall we say of converts? What do you think? Do you think that the Christians whom your predecessors saw in Malabar had come from your country, Europe? No. No. Without anybody's telling them, all are aware that they were Malabarians who had accepted the holy faith. It is a fact that before you and your forefathers came to Malabar there were in Malabar those who announced the faith.

"We have, therefore, to take into account the difference between the converts of those olden days and those of modern times. In olden days the people belonging to the honourable, to the prominent and also to the poor families, houses and races of Malabar generally used to accept the holy faith with no aversion or dislike for it. Those who accepted it, as children of the same father, procured everything needed for soul and body and for the whole community, in the spirit of Christian charity and unity without any quarrel or misunderstanding." [47]

So Fr. Paremakkal affirms that there were in Malabar, "those who announced the faith". As he is speaking

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about conversions of non-Christians, this is clearly about preaching to the non-Christians.

Caste distinction in the Church created by the Portuguese

Those who accepted the faith, Fr. Paremakkal says, belonged to the prominent and also to the poor families, and houses and classes of Malabar, but that they all lived as one community, as children of the same father, in the spirit of Christian charity and unity. Though he speaks mainly about Malabar his statement is very significant. The Malayalam word "Jathikal" means classes or castes. So, people of different castes and classes accepted the faith; but there was no class distinction among them; they lived as one community, "as children of the same father."

But regarding those who were converted by the Portuguese he says: "For, you have kept them as separate groups calling some Mundukar, some Margakkar and some Kuppayakkar. You have also given them another rite and different customs."[48]

Fr. Placid speaks about a Manuscript kept in the British Museum, supposed to be a report about Malabar written by Roz S. J. in 1604. It enumerates four principal families in Malabar who greatly helped the non-Christians who were converted to Christianity over the centuries.

Fr. E. R. Hambye S. J. summarises the missionary history of the St. Thomas Christians of India in these words: "For centuries the Thomas Christians expanded, thanks to their own zeal, though inspired also by the apostolic spirit of their East-Syrian brethren. We

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know that some monks from India went to the Far East, if not to China and Central Asia. Thomas Christians during the 10th-11th centuries tried to spread their faith in the Maldive Islands, and as late as the 15th century Nairs in Kerala were still joining their ranks." [49]

We shall explore in the next part, the missionary activities of the Thomas Christians outside India.

IV. INDIAN MISSIONARIES IN FOREIGN MISSIONS

A Souvenir brought out on the occasion of the Tricentenary of the Diocese of Mylapore gives the following foot-note on the first page: "Rev. Fr. Francis Poire S. J. says in his excellent book - La Triple Couronne de la Bienheureuse Vierge Mére de Dieu - printed for the first time in Paris in 1643, quoting from the history of China of Fr. J. Gonzales, 'And the Bishop of Japan affirms having found in the Records of Mylapore that, more than a thousand years before, preachers had been sent from thence to China to announce the Christian faith. From authentic sources it is known that from the days of St. Thomas churches were established in China." [50]

The French original reads: "Et dábontant ce que l'Eveque du Japon assure avoir recontre' dans les archives de Meliapor, savoir est, que de la furent envoy'es, il y a plus de mille ans de predicateurs a'la China pour y annoncer la Foi Chretienne. Voire nous apprenons par des témoignages authentiques que dés le temps de Saint Thomas, il y eut des Eglises fondees." [51]

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Fr. Poire, as well as Fr. Gonzales, wrote before the middle of the 17th century. So "more than a thousand years before", as attested by the Bishop of Japan refers the 7th century on an earlier period when Indian missionaries went to China to preach the faith.

The testimony of the Bishop of Japan, he says, is not based on hearsay, but on the records in the archives in Mylapore. This statement prompts us to study more about the possible labours of Indian missionaries in the past outside the confines of the country.

Christianity in China

There is a strong tradition in the East Syrian and the Indian Church that St. Thomas himself preached in China and founded churches there. This is confirmed by the prayers of the Divine Office of the Church.

In the Night Service (Lelia) of the feast of St. Thomas we find the following hymn: "The error of idolatory was banished from India by St. Thomas. The Chinese and Ethiopians were converted to the truth by St. Thomas. Through St. Thomas the splendour of a life-giving faith flourished through all India. Through St. Thomas the kingdom of Heaven took wings and sped its flight to the Chinese."[52] There is also this antiphone: "The people of India, of China, of Persia and others on the islands together with those of Syria, Armenia, Greece and Roumania, venerate thy Holy Name, in memory of St. Thomas."

Arnobius who lived towards the end of the third

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century, in his apologetical work, Disputationum Adversus Gentes, gives a list of countries that had turned to Christ: "For the evangelising of India must be counted, and the purposes of reckoning we must include the work done among the Seres (Chinese) the Persians, and Medes, in Arabia and Egypt, in Asia..." [53]

We do not intend to discuss whether St. Thomas himself went to China, but only want to make one observation. Taking into account the entire circumstances it was not unlikely that St. Thomas went as far as China. According to tradition St. Thomas arrived in South India in 52 A. D. and died in 72. Between these long years there were ample opportunities to visit China and then return to Mylapore

Disciples of St. Thomas in China

Whether St. Thomas visited China or not, it is quite reasonable to surmise that his disciples in India went to China during his life time and thereafter carrying the Christian message.

Assemani makes the observation that the prayers of the Divine Office of the East Syrian Church relating to St. Thomas could be justified even if the Apostle had only sent his disciples or if after his death his Indian converts had gone to China to preach there. "...non tamen probat Apostolum Thomam ad Sinas per seipsum abiisse, ibique Evangelium praedicasse: illa enim omnia per Thomae discipulos, sive Thomae ipsius tempore, sive aliquo post ejusdem obitum intervallo (quod probabilius existimo) facta, laudes illas quas in Breviario Chaldaico leguntur, sancto Apostolo recte

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conciliare possunt, etiamsi in Sina ille numquam fuerit." [54]

Therefore, Assemani supports the view that the disciples of St. Thomas from India, during his lifetime, or more probably sometime after his death had carried the Christian faith to China.

Dr. J. E. Edkins, writing about the religion of the Chinese people, states that there was a tradition among them, that an Indian missionary was the first to preach the Christian faith in their country.

"Some of the Roman missionaries have claimed that Christianity had been introduced in China by the Apostle Thomas. The proof of this assertion, they said, was found in the tradition of the Chinese. The Buddhists speak of a certain ascetic by the name of Thamo, who might have come by Sea from India, at the beginning of the 6th century. In Sanscrit his name was Bodhi-dharma. There is no need of minute information about his religious opinions and his biography. In this era, there were in China three thousand Hindus filled with the hope of spreading the Buddhist faith. The first Roman missionaries insufficiently informed about the history and religions of China mistook the name Thamo for a Chinese form of the name Thomas. Since he was described as a rigorous ascetic and great miracle-worker they concluded his identity with the Christian Apostle." [55]

Descarding the details as to the name etc., the tradition in effect, says that an Indian missionary, at an early period, was an important factor in the spread of Christianity in China. It may be, that after the

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first two or three centuries Christianity disappeared from China and was then reintroduced in the 6th or 7th century.

Hsianfu stone monument

Hsianfu was for several centuries the capital of Northern China. The monument casually unearthed there in 1625 A. D. gives a brief account of Christianity in China in the 7th and 8th centuries. Written in Chinese and Syriac, the story begins with the coming of Alopen, a missionary from Tachin in A. D., 635. It describes how Alopen was received by the Emperor, how with imperial support Christianity was preached throughout the country and monasteries and churches established in every Province. The Church met with intermittent persecutions. The story ends with a description of the erection of the monument in 781 A. D. [56]

Tachin could signify some country west of China. Many authors think it was Syria or Palestine, from where the missionaries had arrived.

The monument also makes mention of batches of missionaries newly arriving in China. The Syriac portion gives a list of seventy names, one of a bishop and others of priests, monks, and deacons. Among the names are Mar Yohannan, Mar Sarghese Corepiscopa, Geevarghese, Isahaac, Mathai, Simeon, Apraem etc., It is likely that some of these were from India.

Indian Missionary Honoured

Le Quien speaks of an Indian missionary, Ysu by name, who was honoured by the Emperor of China with

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gifts and a title of rank around the year 780 A. D. Ysu is probably equivalent to Josue in Syriac: "Sinis ab anno Christi 780 imperante Kien-cum-xim-ven-vu, sacredos alter Ysu, qui cum honoris titulo e regno pagodum, sive per Indian Venerat, Evangelium praedicans, eximiis muneribus honeratus est. Absurdus non ero si nomen ejus Syriacum fuisse josue dixero."[57]

Favourable Circumstances

When we consider the close contacts India had with China on the one hand, and the relation between the Indian and the Persian Churches on the other hand, as well as other aspects, we will be inclined to the view that Syrian or Persian monks were working together with Indian missionaries in China.

There was constant trade between India and China and ships were regularly going from the Indian Coast, especially from Mylapore, to China.

There were Jews in South India and they were among the enterprising merchants. At the same time, Jews had settled down in China also. The first Jewish converts in India. on the Malabar Coast, must have passed on the Christian message to their followmen in China.[58]

From Persia there were two routes leading to China; one by land passing through Turkeystan and North of Tibet. The other was the Sea route passing through Mylapore, Ceylon etc. It was at Mylapore that the route to Malaya and the Sund Isles, and China bifurcated.

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Numerous Buddhist monks were going to China from India in their zeal to propagate their religion. The Chinese Emperors welcomed the missionaries. In 65 A.D. the Chinese Emperor sent ambassadors to India in order to get some Buddhist preachers. During the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the Buddhists continued to send missionaries there. Many of the Buddhist texts were translated into Chinese. By the end of the 3rd century there were in China about one hundred and eighty Buddhist monasteries with three thousand and seven hundred monks. Their number increased greatly in the succeeding years.[59]

During the reign of Harsha, in the 7th century (606-647) the relations between India and China appear to have been very close. It was at this time that the Chinese scholar and Buddhist monk Hiuen-Tsang came to India and stayed at the court of Harsha. He spent about 14 years in India and practically travelled all over the country. The account he gives India is most informative.[60] Alopen had arrived in China during this period and was followed by other Christian missionaries. Harsha's time was specially propitious also for Christian missions in China.

"Mylapore Priests in China"

The Chinese Church experienced a severe persecution from A. D. 845 at the hands of Emperor Wu Tsung. The crack-down was against all foreign religious, and it affected Buddhists, Zorastrians and Christians alike. His edict of A.D. 845, after dealing with Buddhists contains this decree concerning the Christian missionaries: "As for the foreign bozes (monks) who came

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here to make known the law which is current in their kingdom, there are about 3000 of them, both from Tachin and from Mu-hu-po. My command is that they also return to the world so that in the customs of our Empire there be no mixture."[61]

Fr. Hosten devotes a separate chapter under the heading: "Mylapore priests in China." Tachin as already stated, might be Syria or Palestine. But what about Mohupa? Which is this place called Mohupa? Pauthier, Yule, Hosten and others are of opinion that Muhupa is Molepattan, i. e. Mayilapur or Mayilapattan: Fr. Hosten writes: "Which was the country called Muhupa? Pauthier takes Mahupa country for Mabar, i, e. the Coromandel Coast of Southern India, and thinks that offshoots of the St. Thomas Christians are meant."[62]

They had bishops and priests. Yule, whom Fr. Hosten also supports, is of the opinion that some of these priests were from the Malabar Coast: "Some of the Syrian priests in China came, no doubt from Malabar via Mylapore."[63]

Theophilus the Indian from Maldives

The Greek historian Philostorgius, writing around 423 speaks of Theophilus the Indian. He was from an Indian island and was sent as hostage to the Romans during the reign of Constantine (A.D. 306-37). Theophilus was baptised at Constantinople and became a monk. He was consecrated an Arian bishop in A. D. 350 and was sent to his native island and to the main-land to spread Christianity (Arian doctrines) by Constantius.[64] The island of his birth is named Divu-in a Latin text. Another contemporary historian Ammianus Marcellinus

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about 362 A. D. makes mention of similar islands while writing about legations at the accession of Julian the Apostate, the new Emperor: "... inde nationibus Indicis certatim cum donis optimates mittentibus ante tempus ab us que Divis et Serendivis." Yonge translates it as follows: "Legations were coming in from everywhere... the Indian tribes vied with each other, sending nobles loaded with gifts even from the Maldive Islands and Ceylon."[65] Perhaps from the time of Theophilus or even earlier there were Christians in Maldives.

The Maldive–Laccadive islands had Christian communities for many centuries, it seems, from several documents. Elias Metropolitan of Damascas, c. 893, gives a list of Bishops subject to the Patriarch of Babylon among which we find: "The Bishop of Siran, the Bishop of Marmadit and the Bishop of Socotra." Siran, some authors identify with Ceylon and Marmadit with Maldives.[66] In the 11th century Sbaryeshu III (1057–1072) ordained a Bishop for the islands of the Indian Sea, another for Socotra.[67] The inhabitants of these islands had close relations with the people of the Malabar Coast especially with Cannanore.

Socotra

Socotra is an island in the Indian Ocean situated not far from the entrance to the Red Sea. Among the Greeks it was known as Dioscordia and according to some the name is derived from an Indian root 'Dviba Sukhadhara' which means "Lucky Island." It is about eighty one miles in length. Among the inhabitants were Indians, Arabs and Greek settlers. The island was a regular stopping place for ships sailing from Egypt to

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Persia and India in search of pepper, pearls and precious stones.

Christianity in Socotra is of particular interest to us for various reasons. The Church was established on the island at a very early date and was in close contact with the Church in India. Socotra was a suffragan See of the Metropolitan of India. As such they had many things in common as regards Church discipline and ecclesial life. We possess luckily a lot of information about Christianity on the island.

According to their tradition the Socotrans were converted to Christianity by St. Thomas himself. The boat in which the Apostle was travelling was stranded on the island and he preached the faith to the islanders.[68]

Martim Affonso de Mello who reached Socotra with a Portuguese fleet wrote to the king of Portugal in 1527: "On Socotra there are many Christians of the race which was converted there by St. Thomas. They have churches and crosses, and their manner of praying is like that of the Chaldeans. In everything they live as Christians.[69]

We have mentioned above the testimonies of Cosmas Indicopleustes and Elias Metropolitan about the Bishop residing in Socotra. Marco Polo who visited the island around 1293 gives further information. He writes: "Upon leaving these islands (of Males and Females) and proceeding 500 miles in the southernly direction, you reach the island of Socotra, which is very large and abounds with the necessaries of life... Their religion is Christianity, and they are duly baptised, and are under

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the government, as well temporal as spiritual, of an archbishop who is not in subjection to the Pope of Rome, but to a Patriarch who resides in the city of Baghdad, by whom he is appointed, or, if elected by the people themselves, by whom their choice is confirmed".[70]

From other authors we understand that the Bishop of Socotra was under the Metropolitan of India Gouvea informs us on the evidence of documents he saw in Malabar that the Archbishop of India used to send his suffragans to Socotra and China.[71]

Fr. Hosten confirms this statement. He says: "About the year 1500 the Malabar Bishops from Mesopotamia still visited Socotra or were appointed to it. They called themselves Bishops of China, Hend or Hind and Socotra".[72]

Al-Hamdani, a historian (945) tells us that in the tenth century Christians on the island numbered ten thousand men who could bear arms.[73]

Early in the sixteenth century the Portuguese established a fortress on Socotra. The fleet bound for India set sail in 1541 from Lisbon with the flag-ship Santiago under the command of the newly appointed Governor of India Martin Affonso de Sousa. Francis Xavier travelled in his company. The fleet lay at anchor at the island for a short period. Francis availed of this opportunity to visit the islanders twice during this short stay. Francis Xavier and his companions have given first hand information about the Christians there and about some of their practices. Quoting them Fr. Schurhammer writes. They also wore a simple cross

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hanging from their necks, for they were proud of being Christians eventhough they had little knowledge of their faith, because of the long centuries of isolation and neglect. "Each church had but one altar and upon it one cross, for the Christians of Socotra had a great reverence for the cross."[74]

The above passages show how they had a great reverence for the cross, a simple cross without a figure on it. The same was true about their counterparts in India.

The priests and the people spent much time in prayer. They came together for the Divine Office: "Four times each day they came to the churches to recite these prayers...at midnight, dawn, the hour of Vespers and in the evening for Compline."[75] Father Francis attended their prayers once. We have the following account about it: "Master Francis once attended Vespers conducted by one of the casis (Kasisa or priest). It lasted for a full hour, and during this time the priest was continually occupied with incensing the cross and reciting the prayers. Francis wrote three or four of these down and believed that the prayers were recited in Chaldean. During the ceremony the Alleluia was frequently heard".[76]

Francis Xavier and his companions were particularly impressed by their spirit of penance and the way in which they observed the periods of fast. "They observed two periods of fasting each year. One of these began with the April new moon and lasted for two months...The priests were great fasters. During their period of fasting they ate neither fish nor flesh nor

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drank any milk; and they would rather have died than do so...Although the island was rich in fish, they ate nothing but dates and vegetables at these times. If a lay man ate any meat during a period of fasting he could not enter the church".[77] Such was the discipline and the spirit that animated the Christians in Socotra and Thomas Christians of India.

It is to be specially noted that Socotra and the Laccadive Islands lay along the Sea route from the Red Sea ports to India, and Java was on the way to China.

Among the Christians of these islands, Socotra, Laccadive, Maldives and Java islands some might have been migrants from India and others local converts.

Metropolitan of India with Suffragans in Socotra and China

Le Quien speaks about two Prelates, Mar Sabro and Mar Proud who came to Malabar about A. D. 880. After their death, he says, at the request of the Malabar Christians, the Patriarch sent to India Mar John as Metropolitan along with two suffragans, Mar Dua and Mar Thoma. Mar Dua was made the Bishop of Socotra and the other, Bishop of Masina (Maha China) or China, i. e. Cathay, Mar John had his See at Cranganore. According to Giamil, Mar John and his suffragans were, sent around A. D. 1129.[78]

Mar Yahb Alaha and Companion Bishops

In 1490 A. D. a delegation of three Christians from India, probably from Malabar, went to Babylon to request the Patriarch to send bishops to India. One of them died on the way and only two reached Baghdad,

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George and Joseph. These seem to have been monks, because in a Syrian manuscript they are spoken of as monks, who came from India: "Historia monachorum, qui in Mesopotamiam ex India venerunt, anno Graecorum, 1801, Christi 1490, sub Simeone Patriarcha Chaldaeorum, episcopos pro Indiarum regionibus postulari, Nimirum Georgius et Joseph..." We may infer from this document that there were monks and monasteries in Malabar during that period.[79]

Patriarch Simeon ordained and sent with them two Bishops Mar John and Mar Thomas to India.

Mar Thoma returned to Mesopotamia in 1492. Patriarch Simeon died in 1503, and was succeeded by Patriarch Elijah. He ordained Mar Yahb Alaha as Metropolitan and two other Bishops Mar John and Mar Jacob. The three prelates with Mar Thoma reached India. We have their story in a Syriac manuscript: "He (Mar Simeon) was succeeded by Mar Elijah, the Catholicos and Patriarch, who also took from the monastery of St. Eugenius three pious monks one of whom, Brother David Arikha, he ordained metropolitan and renamed Mar Yahb Alaha; the next one, called Brother George, he ordained bishop, and decreed he be named Mar Denha. The last one, Brother Masudus whom he likewise ordained bishop was renamed Mar Jacob. He ordained all of them in the monastery of St. John the Egyptian, the carnal brother of St. Ahha, which is situated in the vicinity of Gazarte of Baith Zabadai in the year one thousand eight hundred and fourteen of the Greeks (A. D. 1503). Then he sent the four Fathers to the country of India, to the islands of the Sea which are inside Java, and to China."[80]

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It is important to consider that they were sent to India, the islands around Java and to China. From the context it appears that one or two of them were destined as suffragan Bishops of Java and China.

Testimony of Trigault

Nicolas Trigault S. J., who arrived in China soon after the death of Fr. Matheo Ricci, published Ricci's Memoirs in 1625 under the title 'De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas'. In the Memoirs he says that the ancient title of the Archbishop of India was "Metropolitan of All India and China". This is how Mar Jacob and Mar Joseph used to sign, he testifies: "Qando vero Lusitani Cocinum appulerunt, regebat hanc Ecclesiam Malabaricorum montium D: Jacobus, qui sic scribebat Metropolita Indiae et Chinae, ut constat etiam ex ejusdem manuscripto novi Testam enti codice ubi in calce sic habetur: scripsit hunc librum D. Jacobus Metropolita Indiae et Chinae. Eodem modo D. Joseph post praedictum D. Jacobum, qui Romae diem obiit sic subscribebat. D. Joseph Metropolita totius Indiae et Chinae, et hic est antiquissimus titulus Episcoporum hujus Ecclesiae."[81]

Two Metropolitans

We find there were two metropolitans at the same time, during certain periods, one of India and the other of China. In the 8th century lists of Metropoiitans, the metropolitan of India occupies the 10th position, and of China 11th. But the order changed afterwards, India holding 13th or 14th place with China coming before that.[82]

The Persians and Syrians understood by the name Sina or Cathay (borealem) Northern China; Masina was used for Southern China.

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When there were two Metropolitans for India and China it is possible that the Southern part of China was under the charge of the Metropolitan of India.

In all the regions under the care of the Metropolitan of India, we could infer that priests and missionaries also had gone to attend to the spiritual needs of the people and to assist the Suffragan Bishops.

Cardinal Tisserant's tribute

Two Bishops, Mar Elias and Mar Joseph, were sent to India in 1556 by the Chaldean Catholicos Mar Abdiso who was in explicit communion with Rome. Mar Joseph was to be installed as the Metropolitan of the Indies. The two Bishops had carried with them letters from Rome. But in spite of that the Portuguese authorities detained them forcibly in the Dominican monastery at Bassein and they were not allowed to proceed to Malabar. Finally after eighteen months they were released and came to the South. They spent two years visiting the parishes and baptising many non-Christians. While commenting on their visit Cardinal Tisserant pays rich tributes to the missionary spirit of the Thomas Christians. We quote here Cardinal Tisserant who is a great authority on the history of the Church in India. "It should be mentioned also that many non-Christians were baptized in the course of the visit. Already in those remote days, the Syrians of India possessed a genuine missionary spirit, the more so because it was spontaneous. In point of fact they had always made proselytes among their non-Christian neighbours. No wonder, then, that the preaching during those two years provoked conversions more numerous than was

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usually the case. Unhappily such zeal was to be hampered, if not hidden under a bushel, during the following centuries, because the Christians lost their normal independence and therefore, their religious spontaneity," [83]

How did many of these churches become Extinct?

The Church completely disappeard from several places in India, mentioned above, with no traces of Christianity left. How could it have happened? What must have been the circumstances that brought about such a calamity? One could imagine some such cause as persecution in different forms, mass killing of Christians, forced conversion to other religions and the creation of conditions under which it was impossible for Christians to live peacefully. Or it could be interstate wars followed by extermination of the vanquished, or again natural calamities. Perhaps all these must have contributed to the extinction of Christians in many centres.

When we turn back to the past, we see how ancient cities like Mohenjodaro and Harappa were buried under the earth for centuries. In regions where Jainism and Buddhism were once prevalent, today these religions are almost non-existent. The once flourishing and vigorous Church of North Africa now lives only on the pages of history.

We do have clear indications of the fate of Christians in certain parts of India. Friar Jordanus writes around 1330 A. D. concerning the persecution of Christian and expropriation of the churches by Muhammedans: "In this India (India the Less, Konkan to Sind)

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the greater part of the people worship idols, although a great share of the sovereignity is in the hands of the Turkish Saracens, who came forth from Multan, and conquerd and usurped dominion to themselves not long since and destroyed an infinity of idol temples, and likewise many churches, of which they made mosques for Mahomet, taking possession of their endowments and property. It is grief to hear and woe to see!" [84]

Further he describes the condition of Christians there: "In this India (India the Less) there is a scattered people one here, another there, who call themselves Christians, but are not so, nor have they baptism, nor do they know anything else about the faith."[85]

From this description, we could infer that the Christians there remained for a long time without pastors and priests to administer the sacraments and to instruct them in Christian faith. Bishops, and sometimes priest also, were sent to India by the Patriarch of Babylon. When the route from Persia leading to India came under the control of Muslims, entry of priestly ministers to our country must have become impossible. A Christian community left without pastors for a long time is likely to perish as sheep without a shepherd.

Conquest of Sind

Historians narrate the conquest of Sind by the Arabs. The city of Debal in Sind was captured by Mohammed-bin-Quasim in A. D. 712 after a fierce battle. A general massacre followed for three days. Those who did not become Muslims were murdered or made slaves. Women were taken away as captives. A similar fate

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might have befallen Christian communities in Sind and other places.[86]

The Coromandel Coast

The Coromandel Coast had its own share of persecutions as a result of which Christianity was wiped out from many localities. The Christians of Kaveripattanam were forced to flee to Malabar for refuge, it is said, due to persecutions in the 3rd or 4th century.[87]

When Friar Oderic visited Mylapore about A. D. 1325, he found there some 15 Christian families. Around A. D. 1430 there were more Christians, one thousand according to Nicolo de Conti.

Mar Jacob and his companion Bishops, writing from India to Patriarch Simeon of Babylon in 1504, says that the church (monastery) at Mylapore which was in ruins is being restored and the city is being reinhabited by Christians: "Sed et Aedes Sancti Apostoli a Christianis quibusdam habitari coepti sunt, qui de earum instauratione satagant... positaeque sunt ad mare in urbe quae dicitur Mailapor." (As to the monastery (church) of St. Thomas the Apostole, some Christian men have gone into it, have inhabited it and are now busy restoring it... it is on the shores of the Sea in a town called Mailapore).[88]

We may conclude from these that the Christians in Mylapore were subjected to intermitent persecutions which finally.

Socotra

The bitter persecution the Christians in the island suffered at the hands of the Mohammedans can be

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understood from the following letters written by St. Francis Xavier and his companions. Fr. Schurhammer gives the following excerpts:

"For the present the fifteen thousand Christians in Socotra were being cared for by a Franciscan who had remained there. But the king should urge his confreres to make further efforts in their regard and he should order the governor to drive the Moors from the island. They came from abroad, plundred the land, tyrannized the Christians, and took their daughters and forced them to become Mohammedans. Their leaders had already left the island before the Friars came, and an order for the rest to leave would be sufficient."[89] Evidently under such circumstances Christianity could not survive.

Absorbed into the Latin Church

The St. Thomas Christians in several places were absorbed into the Latin Church, sometimes on a massive scale. Where there were only Latin priests to administer the spiritual care of the Syrian Christians they often could not continue to keep their identity. The care of the Thomas Christians of Quilon was entrusted to a Dominican called Rodriguez by the Portuguese before 1549 disregarding the authority of the Oriental Prelates then in Malabar.[90]

Syrian Christians were considered Nestorians as they followed the Chaldean Rite. In 1515 A. D. one thousand and two hundred of these so-called Nestorians are said to have renounced their errors. Similar conversions took place in Mylapore in 1516.[91]

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Numerous baptisms and conversions reported to have been made by the Portuguese missionaries and St. Francis Xavier himself, at least in some cases, were baptisms and rebaptisms of the Thomas Christians. They thought that the baptisms of "these heretical Nestorians" were not valid.[92]

St. Francis Xavier is said to have baptized in Goa several thousand people every month. How could it be possible? Fr. Mascarenhas thinks they were only baptisms of Syrian Christians. He says: "Again St. Francis is known to have baptized Goans on an average of ten thousand a month. Let us say he baptized about twenty five days a month to give him some rest. It works up to about four hundred baptisms a day. Consider also the long rite of baptism he had to go through at that time. Moreover, was he only baptising and not instructing? How could he instruct so many in so short a time? Or was it only a question of rebaptising the Christians of St. Thomas? In that case we can understand there was no absolute need of instructing and preparing them. Both internal evidence from his letters and other reasons given above force one to conclude that the 10,000 baptisms a month attributed to St. Francis were not an instance of mass conversion or miraculous Christianisation but only of mass Lusitanisation, under the aegis of the Portuguese Empire."[93]

Conclusion

Our investigation was mainly about two questions relating to the history of the Church in the Indian subcontinent – the extent of the spread of Christianity in India, and the extent of Indian Christian missionary

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activities. Some of the documents cited may be of uncertain historical value. Some others require further study to ascertain their accuracy and reliability. There are however a number of proofs – monuments, records and testimonies, which carry unquestionable authority, that throw light on our research. Taking all these together, we can rightly draw the conclusion that Christian communities had existed in the early centuries all over India. They were more numerous and widely spread on the Western and Eastern Coasts; Malabar was always a stronghold of Christianity. But to speak of St. Thomas Christians, or the church in India, in terms of Malabar, as if it was confined to the Malabar Coast, is contrary to historical facts. It was an All India Church.

Fr. Campori S. J. testifies that the Head of the Church in India was called the Metropolitan of All India and its Confines.[94] We see that this title was quite justified, for his authority extended all over India, and beyond to Socotra, Ceylon, and sometimes to Java and China.

The spread of Christianity in different parts of India and in some of the neighbouring countries must be attributed chiefly to the missionary efforts of Indian missionaries, though they were assisted by monks from Persia and Mesopotamia.

It does not mean that the Church in India was throughout the centuries engaged in vigorous missionary work. As is the case of the Church anywhere else in the world, there were ups and down, periods which were favourable for missionary activity and times

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when circumstances did not permit any large scale apostolic work.

Further research on this subject is necessary, and let us hope that the efforts to discover more about the history of the Church founded by Apostle Thomas in India, her missionary activities and her relation with other Sister Churches will bring to light a lot more of historical information.

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The Indian Church of St. Thomas Christians and Her Missionary Enterprises Before the Sixteenth Century

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