

**HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE ARRIVAL OF APOSTLE ST. THOMAS
IN KERALA AND ITS
INFLUENCE ON THE LIFE OF THE ST. THOMAS CHRISTIANS**

Final Report of the Minor Research Project

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE WORK

“But when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth” (The Bible Acts 1:8). The fountain head and holy foundation of the entire Christianity in Kerala is St. Thomas from whom emerges the traditions, rites and rituals prevalent in the St. Thomas Christian Community today. St. Thomas, one among the 12 apostles of Christ, after visiting Socotra came to Muziris or Kondungallore, north of Cochin in about AD 52. He converted natives of sound social and religious positions and established Christian communities at seven places. He also appointed leaders from the leading families from whom he had converts to look after and lead the church. From Kerala, St. Thomas proceeded to the eastern parts of south India where also he had converts and then on he moved as far as to Malacca and China. Later returning to India he was martyred and buried at Mylapore in AD 72. His mortal remains are entombed at Mylapore now known as St. Thomas Mount.

This above said is the substance of the tradition presented and transmitted by the living community of the St. Thomas Christian of India about their apostolic origin. Details of this can be found in apostolic fathers’ writings, ancient traveller’s writings, pattanam excavations, a few folk songs like Ramban Pattu, Veeradiyan Pattu, Margam Kali Pattu etc. These folk songs used to sing during festival occasions and these songs now exist in written records.

Authority for the St. Thomas tradition of Kerala Christianity, i.e. its historicity, is a matter of dispute among the historians, to a great extent, for want of sufficient, direct archaeological evidences or backing of contemporary written documents. There are a good number of Historians and writers, from all over the world, are questioning the Indian apostolate of St. Thomas and the validity of the arguments of its proponents. There is no contemporary evidence showing that Thomas had been in the subcontinent, but it was possible for an Aramaic-speaking Jew from Galilee to make such a trip to Kerala in the 1st century. The Cochin Jews are known to have existed in Kerala around that time. But reviewing the opinions of contemporary writers and existing evidences, (including the earliest known source connecting the apostle to India is the Acts of Thomas, written in the early 3rd century) historians concludes that Christian Church was established in Southern India, before the beginning of the third century.

Thomasine Christianity is found in the southern Indian state of Kerala. These churches of Malabar trace their roots back to St. Thomas the Apostle who according to local

tradition arrived along the Malabar Coast in the year A.D. 52. Many early Christian writings, which belong to centuries especially following the first Ecumenical Council of 325, exist about St. Thomas mission. The 'India' referred in these works is a generic term to denote all the territories that lied to the east of the Roman empire of 1st century CE. The traditional writings and sayings are very important in the writings of history. The existing historical evidences also consider for writing history.

In this context, a few important aspects of this tradition which draws our serious attention are these: The Seven places where St. Thomas had established Christian communities are even now see able and locatable. In almost all these place there are strong presence of St. Thomas Christian communities with their tradition, apart from the stories how they were subsequently diffused into other and surrounding localities. Similarly the port where the apostle landed in Kerala, the places where he preached and did miracles and made converts the leading families whom he baptized and appointed as caretaker of his communities, the site where he met martyrdom are traceable, lively and important. All these are still living evidence for the St. Thomas tradition.

Those places where St. Thomas established churches again attract our attention. Because all those places lay located not only in or near the former Jewish colonies but also in important trading centers near the sea or on back lagoons or river shores (eg, Kodungallur, Niranam, Palayur, Gakamangalam, Kollam etc). The leading families from whom the apostle had converts and appointment as leaders exist even now with their hereditary claims from generations. Therefore all the local, physical and circumstantial evidences are in favour of the tradition witnessed by the St. Thomas Christians. It is important to note that there is no rival tradition in the church of the Thomas Christians in Kerala with regard to its origin and there to no other country in the world which claims that St. Thomas is their apostle and died there.

The arrival of St. Thomas in India was a matter of great significance not only for the Christians of this country; but also for the whole nation. St. Thomas arrived in Kerala in 52 A.D. through the sea route. According to the different historical sources and excavations reveals that there existed an ancient trade relation between India and eastern world. There were no rival traditions for the origin of Christianity in India other than attributed to St. Thomas. In the absence of such claims and due to the presence of the living community of the Thomas Christians in Kerala along with the presence of the burial place of the apostle at Mylapore from centuries, it is just to admit the prevailing claim that out of the evangelical works of St. Thomas the church of the St. Thomas Christians in India had its origin. In Kerala, the tradition of St. Thomas is strong, definite and still living. This church has also

preserved the faith handed down from the days of the Apostle St.Thomas without being defiled by the heresies that plagued the churches elsewhere. This apostolic tradition had given them a feeling of self existence and pride.

St.Thomas Christians in India trace their origin to St.Thomas, the Apostle of Christ. Perhaps this church in India was the only church established by an Apostle outside the Roman Empire. One of the important aspects of the identity of the St.Thomas Christians was their consciousness of their apostolic origin. The judicial and hierarchical independence and purity of faith lasted until this church came into contact with the Portuguese missionaries. The history of the Kerala church from the early centuries right up to the 16th century reveals that the church in Persia played a vital role in nurturing its growth. The St.Thomas Christians were greatly indebted to her. There was no doubt that at the time of the advent of the Portuguese in India, the church in Malabar looked for aid and advice from the church of Persia.

Before the 16th century, the St.Thomas Christians had a religious autonomy and its own traditions by the influence of St.Thomas tradition. These traditions of the St.Thomas Christians were presented by the process through which their church of India came to be ruled over by East Syrian Bishops. The testimonies of the Christians of Kerala and foreign notices clearly suggested that pre-Portuguese Christians established their religious relations with Persia and were hierarchically affiliated to the Syrian church from the 4th century.

St.Thomas Christians had enjoyed social, political and religious superiority. In the earlier period also, Christians enjoyed a high position in the society. The historical evidences and ancient writings including copper plates viz Canai Thomman Copper plate, Tarisapally Copper plates and Grant to Iravikorthan plate etc., are the best sources for students about it. These copper plates really showed the conditions of the Christians at the time of the issue of the plates. The St.Thomas Christians had assimilated many of the social customs and practices of the land and were indistinguishable in the society. This try to reveals the historicity of ancient evidences and relevance of St.Thomas tradition and the influence if this tradition in the life of St.Thomas Christians in Kerala.

When the Portuguese came to Malabar they found the Thomas Christians as a prosperous and flourishing community with a very high social and political status. It was also due to the high social and political privileges, which they enjoyed from the beginning.

The Syrian Christians were conservative and the pride of race and ancient traditions were dearer to them than political and economic development. Thomas Christians had a recognized place in the society and their way of life was deeply influenced by that of the

society in which they lived. But in spite of all these the St. Thomas Christians developed a distinctiveness of their own in the social and political environment of the society. The rulers appreciated their bravery, courage, cleanliness and superiority of caste etc.

In short, the Thomas Christians of India, in the first sixteen centuries of their existence developed an identity of their own with a relative autonomy and self- rule in the universal Church. It was mainly by their apostolic origin and tradition. Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India (1947 – 1964) in the book “Glimpses of World History” (1934) clearly ascertain that “Remember, Saint Thomas came to India when many of the countries of Europe had not yet become Christian, and so those Indians, who trace their Christianity to him have a longer history and a higher ancestry than that of Christians of many of the European countries. And it is really a matter of pride to us that it so happened.” The Thomas Christians carved out a distinct niche in the socio-cultural ambience of Kerala, thereby making the history of Kerala, rich and vibrant.

In this project, by the reference of the Malabar tradition, western tradition, references in the Fathers, travellers and Persian relations of ancient Kerala Christians and different aspects of the Indian tradition give the impression that the central content stands out in clear relief that St. Thomas the Apostle preached, died and was buried in South India. None of the arguments so far advanced seem to be strong enough to erode the validity of this central content. Nor do we foresee the possibility as things stand, of some positive evidence being suddenly unearthed which would impair its value. Therefore the argument of convergence mentioned above appears to be reasonable enough to be accepted. From historical evidences, we can rightly conclude that the origin of Malabar Christianity is not from Thomas, the Manichaen, Thomas of Canai or Nestorian missionaries, but from Apostle Thomas, in the first century itself. The age-old consciousness of the community of St. Thomas Christians, that their origin of Christians is from the mission of St. Thomas the Apostle in India stands sufficiently justified.

The importance of this study.

How did Christianity come to India? One of the theories argues that Christianity was brought to Kerala by merchants, not by St. Thomas the apostle. The merchants in question were “East Syrian traders, from the Persian Gulf area” who came to the continent through the Greco-Bactrian-Persian bridge. Some of the historians argue that these trading vessels only influenced the religious development on the continent to the extent that they carried St.

Thomas or other missionaries to India. They states that “the evidence available seems to confirm this probability, and whether or not the Apostle himself came to South India, it seems certain that other Christians from east Syria who claimed a connection with him did come to reinforce, if not found, the Malabar Church in the first three centuries.” Therefore, proving that merchants arrived in the region around Kerala does not instantly imply that St. Thomas did not use those methods of transportation to satisfy his own goals. Although such shipping routes would allow St. Thomas to complete his mission, their existence does not guarantee his passage.

The origins of Christianity in India had been discussed on the continent ever since the religion was brought to the nation in the first century CE. Christians attributing their salvation to St. Thomas were vocal about this opinion and the idea was soon absorbed by other local churches. However, the topic does not become a major issue until the early nineteenth century. But now a day this is a controversial argument among the historians. This can be gleaned from the existing sources, and the available documents.

Achievements of the project

As a part of the study, presented a paper in the National Seminar titled “St.Thomas Tradition and its Relevance in the History of Kerala” at CMS College on November 26-28 , 2015 and an article was published in the Baselius Researcher (ISSN 0975-8658, Volume XVII, Number 2 July – December) titled “St.Thomas Tradition and its Relevance in the History of Kerala” .

The result of the study may be useful for the Christians of Kerala for understanding the issues related to St.Thomas tradition and its relevance in the present scenario.

Findings of the Study

- This study reveals the historicity of ancient evidences and relevance of St.Thomas tradition and the influence if this tradition in the life of St.Thomas Christians in Kerala.
- Substance of the tradition presented and transmitted by the living community of the St.Thomas Christian of India is their apostolic origin. This apostolic tradition had given them a feeling of self existence and pride.
- In the earlier period also, before the coming of Portuguese, Christians had enjoyed a high positions in the society.

- The arrival of St.Thomas in India was a matter of great significance not only for the Christians of this country; but also for the whole nation.
- The reference of the Malabar tradition, western tradition, references in the Fathers, travellers and Persian relations of ancient Kerala Christians and different aspects of the Indian tradition give the impression that the central content stands out in clear relief that St. Thomas the Apostle preached, died and was buried in South India. In lack of direct evidences, all these evidences like archeological, numismatic, travelers and church father's writings, new excavations at Pattanam, early trade relations between east and west etc clearly established the St.Thomas mission in India and Kerala. Therefore, the origin of Christians is from the mission of St. Thomas the Apostle in India stands sufficiently justified.