

THE MISSION OF ST. THOMAS IN INDIA

Dr. J. ALBARIS

Associate Professor of History
P.G. & Research Department of History
Alagappa Govt. Arts College
Karaikudi – 630 003
Tamil Nadu.
Mob. No: +91-9443619556

The history of Christianity in India is as old as the history of the universal church. The Syrain Catholics and Syro-Malankara Catholics support this view. Though primary sources are scanty to defend this view, there are very meager secondary sources to support this, which are not absolutely and definitely reliable. Traditions, relics and monuments associated with the Apostle, St. Thomas¹ are available.

Of course, Christianity traces its origin from St. Thomas one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ. As per the western tradition it is believed that St. Thomas following the well established trade routes reached India. But according to Indian tradition, he reached the ancient Port of Muziri in Crangarore and preached the Christian faith.² This tradition was widely held from early times and it has been accepted as true by many writers of repute. There is in the tradition itself, nothing improbable. At that stage, there was commerce between India and Europe by caravans overlord, by the Persian Gulf and by the Red sea, so that the apostle could journey to India.³ It is said that he worked among the fishermen of the erstwhile Travancore State jurisdiction and converted them to Christianity.⁴ As a result of his propagation and missionary work, he converted many to Christianity. There were converts from the Brahmias and other high castes. To an extent, he succeeded to secure conversions from among the princely sections of the society. At that stage, Christianity received ample patronage from the petty chieftains.⁵ This led to the beginning of Christian community in India from early Christian era.⁶

The mission of St. Thomas is endorsed by eminent personalities. Our first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in his 'An Autobiography' is of the view that Christianity came to India as early as first century after Christ, long before Europe turned to it and established a fair hold in South India.⁷ Nothing is incredible in the feasibility of the visit of St. Thomas in South India.⁸ The Vatican also endorsed the view of the apostolate of St. Thomas in India.⁹

Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the President of India made the following observation in his speech at the St. Thomas Day Celebration in New Delhi on 18th December 1955. "Remember St. Thomas came to India when many of the countries of Europe and 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 European countries. And it is really a matter of pride to us that it so happened..... This is a popular expression of a very strong view shared by many scholars that Christianity reached in the first century after Christ and that it was brought to this country by one, or even two, of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ The second apostle mentioned here is St. Bartholomeo, but evidence for this claim is just a tradition not described directly or in detail but attended to in passing in some ancient literary works while writing about other things. The so called details available are most" the imaginations, generously employed to fill gaps.¹¹

It is believed that St. Thomas founded basic Christian communities at Maliankara near Kodungallur, Palayur near Chavakad, Kottakayal near Parur, Kokkamangalam, Niraram near Thiruvalla, Chayal near Nilackal and Kurakkeni Quilon. Among the early Christian centres, Kodungallur and Quilon remained the prominent seat of local rulers and large number of people were converted to its fold. Many a traveler who visited South India has recorded the religious tolerance of the sovereigns who treated their Christian subjects on a par with other sects.¹²

Churches and relics associated with the apostle are seen in south India.¹³ The church at Neranam is one of the oldest buildings in Travancore.¹⁴ The construction of the church started at Quilon by the apostle was completed by his disciples later. Another church at Cranganore was also completed like the one at Quilon.¹⁵ Totally, seven churches were established by the Saint, namely Neranam, Kollam, Chayal, Kokkamangalan, Maliankara, Kottakayal and Palayur.¹⁶

After a short stay there, St. Thomas proceeded to Mylapore in Chennai in the Coromandel coast. In A.D. 59, the apostle was called back to Mylapore by King Choran, who imprisoned him because he had given away to the poor the money he had entrusted to him for building a palace for him. But the King's brother died at that time and so that he was bought back to life and the apostle revealed to Choran the beauty of the heavenly palace. The apostle was set free. The king along with 700 non-believers are said to have received baptism from him.¹⁷ From there, he went to China. In Pelking, the apostle converted many to Christian faith and built there a house of prayer.¹⁸ Then he returned to Mylapore, the apostle returned to Malabar in a Malayathur and visited to old places such as Cranganore, Kottakayal, Kokkamangalam, Kallam, Neranam and Chayal, staying in each place for a year and conferring on the faithful the sacrament of confirmation.¹⁹ During his visit to Malabar the apostle had made sure of the proper functioning of the church after him by ordaining priests and consecrating bishops. Kepa and Paul are said to have been consecrated bishops. Kepa belonged to the Cranganore royal family and he has set out to Kerala.²⁰ These bishops and priests obtained other priests by laying on of hands.²¹

St. Thomas preached the gospel and baptized people everywhere and founded churches. He is said to have converted three principal Kings of India, namely Choran or Choran Perumal, the Chola King, Pandi Perumal, the Pandya King and Cheran Perumal, the Chera King

or the King of all Malabar. These resources are strengthened with the existence of churches on the Coromandel coast in olden times, all founded by the apostle. He initiated bishoprics in those parts where he preached.²²

The Mylapore tradition is mainly concerned with the miraculous building of the church by the apostle St. Thomas, whom the people of the locality liked to call 'the Holy Man'. He preached and performed a number of miracles and built a holy house which came to be known as the 'house of the holy man'. It was in this house that he was interned after his martyrdom.²³

Being persecuted in Quilon, the apostle departed for Mylapore. There also he was not left in peace and had to retire to wilderness. He lived on a hill at a distance of one and a half leagues from the place where later his house was built.²⁴ According to an East-Syrian tradition, St. Thomas sold himself to a lord, ambassador of the king of Bisnaga alias Vijayanagar in order to come to India and preach the Gospel. As a result, he preached and baptized many in Gujarat, Magar, Malabar and Gujarat Regions and went to China. There are vestiges of Christians in those places even today.²⁵

But St. Thomas attained Martydom in A.D. at Calamina in St. Thomas Mount, Chennai.²⁶ His body was carried to the town of Mylapore and was buried in a holy shrine, he had built.²⁷ The church of St. Thomas in Mylapore is popular in all over the world.²⁸ His mission was later continued by Christian missionaries, especially by the Franciscans Carmelites and the Jesuits in the modern period.

FOOT NOTES

1. St. Thomas is one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ. He is called as the ‘Apostle of India’.
2. George Mark Moraes, A History of Christianity in India: From Early Times to St. Francis Xavier: A.D. 52 to 1542, Bombay, 1964, p.34.
3. G.T. Mackenzie, Christianity in Travancore, Trivandrum, 1901, p.113.
4. L.M. Pylee, St. Thomas Christians and the Archdiocese of Verapoly, Cochin, 1977, p.21.
5. K.K. Kusuman, ‘The Syro – Malabar Catholic Mission’, B. Sobhanan (ed). A History of the Christian Missions in South India, Kerala Historical Society, Thriuvananthapuram, 1966, p.34.
6. Dinamalar, dt. 6th February 1986, p.2.
7. Jawaharlal Nehru, An Autobiography, Bombay, 1962, p.273.
8. Vincent A. Smith, The Oxford History of India, London, 1919, p.235.
9. Apostolic Letter to the Archbishop of Verapoly, Rome, 13th November 1952.
10. A Mathias Mundadan, History of Christianity in India, Vol.I, From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (Up to 1542 AD), Bangalore, 1984, p.9.
11. K.K. Kusuman, op.cit., p.3.
12. Ibid., p.34.
13. The Hindu, dt. 2nd February 1986, P.II
14. G.T.Mackenzie, Christianity in Travancore, Trivandrum, 1901, p.1.
15. A. Mathias Mundadan, op. cit; p.111
16. G.T.Mackenzie, op. cit; p.1
17. A. Mathias Mundadan, op. cit; p.30

18. Ibid, pp.30-34
19. G.T.Mackenzie, op. cit., p.113.
20. A. Mathias Mundadan, op. cit; p.30-31
21. Ibid; p.31
22. A. Mathias Murdadan, op. cit., p.43.
23. Ibid; p.44.
24. A. Mathias Mundadan, The Arrival of the Portuguese in India and the Thomas Christians under Mar Jacob, 1498 to 1552, p.26.
25. A. Mathias Mundadan, op.cit; p.43.
26. L.M. Pylee, op.cit; p.40
27. George Koil farambil, Caste in the Catholic Community in Kerala, Cochin, 1982, pp.69-70. The Hindu, 2nd February 1986, p.II.