

# *ST. Thomas and Us*

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1900 years is a very long time in the history of man. No kingdom or empire has lasted that long. Even religions become radically changed during such a long span of time. If we look at history, we can find that most world religions have lost their dynamism within three to four hundred years of their origin.

But all religions have their ups and downs. Buddhism throbbed with vigour and vitality in India for at least four centuries. Hinduism, which had been practically swept aside by Buddhism, came back to life after an eclipse of a millennium. In its revived form, which had so little in common with pre-Buddhist Hinduism, the Hindu religion played a vital role in India for three or four centuries.

What about Christianity in India? There is little reason to doubt that it was vitally alive in the time of the Apostle Thomas and for several centuries afterwards. But we know practically nothing in detail about the secret of that vitality.

The only other period in the history of the Indian Church when it has showed any considerable vitality was due to the work of another foreigner, Francis Xavier (16th century). As far as we know it was a Palestinian and a Portuguese who proclaimed the Gospel with highly effective power in the history of our Church.

Of course one could speak of a Sadhu Sunder Singh, but the list of known Indians who have carried the name of Christ to the people of India in an impressive way cannot be very long.

But that is not the only negative side of Indian Christianity. Even with all the help and inspiration that has come from outside to the Syrian Christians of India, no Indian Christian has risen to any outstanding height. I have heard Hindus speak with great admiration about the work of Christians in India, but in every case it has been a non-Indian Christian who has been the object of such admiration.

On the positive side, it is a miraculous fact that only in one little corner of India has the once wide-spread Syrian Church of Asia managed to survive. Perhaps it was only an accident. But I suspect it can be partially explained. The fact that the Church in India never became “established” seems significant. We never seem to have had at any time been a majority religion in any part of India. We may have had small Christian kingdoms or principalities in India at certain periods of our history (e.g. Villavatom, Eravi korttan etc.), but we never were the Church of a conquering ruler or prince. This does not mean that the Christian Community never

exercised economic and political power, but only that such power never reached the point at which it could become arbitrary and oppressive. It was always counter-balanced by other powers.

It is even more distinctive of the Syrian Christianity, which we had here in India that we never seem to have had an autonomous succession of bishops until very late in history. Why was it that we did not establish a self-sustaining hierarchy like, say, the Church of Georgia or the Church of Armenia?

Even Nubia (now partly in Upper Egypt and partly in the Sudan) seems to have had an autonomous and self-sustaining episcopate. As far as I know, only the Ethiopian Church and the Indian Church were very late in achieving autonomy. Was the reason that we were looked upon as inferior and incapable of looking after ourselves by the slightly more fair-skinned Egyptians and Syrians? It is difficult to answer that question.

All we can find out is that the lists of bishops of the West Syrian Church do not contain the names of Indian bishops (bishops in India) until the seventeenth century. We have now complete lists of the bishops of the Syrian Orthodox Church from the sixth century to the 14th century. Prof. Earnest Honigmann has collected the information from the historical records left by John of Ephesus, Zachariah Rhetor, Michael Rabo and Gregory Bar Hebraeus. In his thorough search he has not found the name of a single bishop in India, though he has a complete list of hundreds of bishops in Syria, Phenicia, Mesopotamia, Arabia, Cilicia, Isauria, Cappodocia, Armenia, Asia (Minor), Pamphylia, Lycaonia, Phrygia, all of which were under the Syrian Patriarchate up to the six century.

Even after the discussion between the Greeks and the Syrians became precipitated in the time of Mar Severus, Patriarch of Antioch (512-518) and Mar Jacob Burdono, Metropolitan of Edessa (ca 542-ca 578), we do not read of any consecration of a bishop for India. Mar Jacob Bourdono consecrated two successive patriarchs of Antioch, at least 27 bishops and thousands of (according to one account 102,000) priests for the Syrian and Egyptian Churches. The bishops Mar Jacob consecrated as well as the names of their dioceses can be found in the accounts of John of Ephesus. Mar Jacob consecrated 12 bishops for Egypt. I have examined the complete list of all the bishops consecrated in the Syrian Orthodox Church between 566 and 578, and there is no bishop consecrated for India.

How then did the Church continue in India if no bishop for India was consecrated at this time in Syria?

The only evidence we have comes from Persian or Nestorian Church documents. Of course we hear of John the Persian, representing "Persia and greater India" present at the Council of Nicea in 325. Michael Rabo, the Syrian Church Historian (+1198), who gives a list of bishops present at Nicea, classifies John the Persian among the bishops of Mesopotamia. He could not have been Indian but he may have had Jurisdiction over certain parts of the Parthian Kingdom in India.

The even longer list of Bishops at the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) does not contain the names of any Indian bishops. Nestorian records (the cannons of Ibn-at- Tayyib) tell us that the Metropolitanate of Fars (Parat Maishan) in southern Persia was in charge of their members in India also. This Metropolitanate of Fars was created either in the time of Catholicos Izhaq (399-410 AD) or of Yab -Allaha (415-420). Later the Persians created a Metropolitan for India during the reign of Patriarch (the Catholicos of the East had by this time taken the title Patriarch of Baghdad) Isho-Yahb, but we are not sure which Isho-Yahb this was. There was one patriarch of that name in the 6th century (582-595 AD) and two in the seventh century (628-643 and 650-660). In any case the first clear Knowledge we have of a bishop in India is this Metropolitan of India in the seventh century. The chronicle of Abdisho in the 14th century says that the Metropolitan of India is higher in rank than the Metropolitan of China, but another chronicle from about the same time gives the 12th rank in the Persian Church to the Metropolitan of China, while India comes 13th. We do not know where in India this Persian metropolitan resided. It could have been Malabar; it would have been Kalyan near Bombay; it could even have been Quilon.

The “Doctrine of the Apostles” which in its present form (may be from the 4th century) says clearly that the Apostle Thomas gave “the hand of priesthood” to India. We hear of Daniel the Indian Priest who translated some books from Greek to Syriac but not about any Indian Bishop till the time of Bosmas Indico - pleustes (6th century) who speaks of clergy and believers existing in Ceylon, Malabar, Kalliana, and in North-West India. But we are not sure if “clergy” means bishops or priests. In Malabar, at any rate, at this time, i.e. about 525 A. D., there is only a “Presbyter appointed in Persia”, whereas there are bishops in North-West India.

The absence of Bishops in South India is understandable only if they have to be consecrated in Persia or Syria. The Metropolitans of Fars could hardly have often come to India to consecrate bishops; they could hardly get consecration for themselves, as we know from the quarrels in the Church of Fars in the 6th century reported by the judicial Acts of Mar Aba I. In fact it was only when Fars was beginning to be submerged by Islam that a Metropolitanate was created in India by the Persian Church.

Even before Fars (also called Riwardashir) fell to Islam, the bishops of Fars had failed to consecrate bishops for India as they were supposed to do. The main reason advanced by the Catholicos-Patriarch was that the Indians did not offer the metropolitan enough money. The letter of Persian (East Syrian) Patriarch Isho-Yab III (650-660) to Mar Shim'un, the Metropolitan of Fars and all India, is quite eloquent:

“Remember this also, O God-loving Brother, that as you have closed the door of Episcopal ordination in the face of the many peoples of India, and obstructed the gift of God for the sake of perishable profit that feeds the desires of the body, so also did our own predecessors close the door of the gift of God in your face... Behold, the world is full of bishops, priests and faithful as numerous as the stars of heaven, and increasing day by day. But, as far as your own province is

concerned, when you revolted against the canons of the Church, the succession of priesthood has been broken for the people of India. Not only India, which spreads from the boundaries of the Persian Empire even to the place called Qalah (Quilon? Kalyan? Galle in Ceylon?) A distance of 1200 parasangs (about 4000 miles), but even your own region of Fars, is today in darkness far from the light of the Gospel which comes only through the (letters of Isho-Yab III Syriac text edited by R. Duval in C.S.C.O. second series, vol. III).

Clearly in the seventh century there is no 'Nestorian' bishop in India. We have seen already that at this time no bishop has been consecrated for India by the west Syrian Patriarchate of Antioch.....

What kind of a Church did we have at that time? Did we use the Syriac language for our worship? Did we use the West Syrian liturgy or the East Syrian? We know that the works of Diodore and Theodore (the spiritual mentors of Nestorius) had been translated from Greek into Syriac and sent to India by the bishop of Fars (Ma'na Riwardashir) around the year 470 A. D. This may be taken as evidence that the Syriac language was known to at least some people in India, and that 'Nestorian' literature, and conceivably Nestorian forms of worship were known in India at the end of the 5th century.

We have no evidence at all that the West Syrian liturgy (now used by the Syrian Orthodox) was known to the Indians at that time. We have no report from the West Syrian Patriarchate of Antioch that they were consecrating bishops for India. In fact, apart from the immigration of the merchant community of Thomas Cana, we have no evidence of any direct connection with the Syrian Patriarchate of Antioch during this period.

From the very small fragments of history available to us, we can think that Persian or East Syrian or Nestorian or Chaldean Christianity was brought to India around the end of the 5th century.

The instance reported by Bar Hebraeus in his Ecclesiastical Chronicle, however, points to another aspect of the story.

What was the root of the tension between the Nestorian Catholicos-patriarch of Baghdad and his South Persian Metropolitanate? Could it be that the South Persians objected to the East Syrian Catholicate so easily adopting the Nestorian Faith? The account of Bar Hebraeus clearly points that way. Both the southern province of the Persian Church (Fars of Riwardashir) and the Indian Church refused to accept the Nestorian faith which was brought to them several times beginning with the late fifth century. The attempts of Nestorian patriarchs in the seventh and eighth centuries (under Isho-Yab III and Timothy I) to create an independent Nestorian Metropolitanate in India directly under Bagdad can only be understood in the light of the south Persians revolting against the Nestorian faith. The Indians, who had previously been attached to the south Persian Church, were also not Nestorians at any rate in the fifth century.

It seems clear that a bishop (Mar Joseph) had come with the Thomas of Cana immigration. If this happened in the 4th century, then they were undoubtedly not Nestorians, since the Nestorian teachings began only in the 5th century. Mar Joseph was from Edessa, the true centre of the Syrian Christians (rather than Antioch which was basically a Greek city). If the Southists had thus a West Syrian bishop in the 4th century, did the West Syrian succession continue in India? If it did, then it is quite likely that the west Syrian (so-called Jacobite) and the East Syrian (so-called Nestorian) traditions co-existed in India, conceivably right up to the time of Diamper (1599).

We know that the West Syrian and East Syrian Churches co-existed in Persia at this time. Michael Rabo tells us that during a temporary peace between the Roman and Persian empires (which lasted only 40 years), Jacob Bourdono was able to go to Persia and consecrate a West Syrian Catholicos there, with the approval of the Persian king Khosrau I. This was in 559.

The Arab conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries helped to consolidate the West Syrian (Jacobite) as well as the East Syrian (Nestorian) Churches in the new empire of the Caliphs. Already before that the Metropolitan of Tigris Marutha (629-649) had been made Maphriana with 15 bishops under him in Persia and Mesopotamia. But there is no indication that this Maphriana had Jurisdiction over India, or that there were any Indian bishops under him. The tolerance of the Arabs for the west Syrians was so high that even the Patriarchs of Antioch began making their headquarters in the empire of the Caliphs rather than in Syria.

During the reigns of the great West Syrian Mar Dionysius Bar Slibhi (Ca 1160-1171), Mar Michael Rabo (Patriarch Ca 1166-1199) and Bar Hebreus (1226-1286) we find but few references to bishops in India. They do not speak of any direct Jurisdiction over the Indian Church for either the Maphriana or the Patriarch of Antioch.

The only clearer instance of a foreign bishop coming to India before the 14th century is in the 8th/ 9th century--the coming of Sapor and Prodh. This was a colony of East Syrians who settled in Quilon and built the Tharisa Church. Tharisa, is of course a term used by the Orthodox' i.e. the Jacobite or West Syrian Group.

We come to clearer history only with Mar John of the 14th century, as attested by a Syriac document (now in the Vatican), written in Cranganore in 1301. This John was styled Metropolitan, of the see of St. Thomas and of the whole of India. In Western documents the bishop of India is differently called as Metropolitan, or Catholicos, or sometimes even Patriarch. From this time on it is clear that the struggle is between the three parties -- (a) the 'Nestorian' Patriarch of Baghdad, (b) the Uniat Chaldean Patriarch of Baghdad, and (c) the Portuguese and other Roman Catholic prelates. The Jacobites or west Syrians are so completely reduced to shambles by internal quarrels in Syria and Persia that they have no time or possibility to attend to the needs of India.

It is only in recent times that the Church of St. Thomas has slowly begun to become autonomous. The Roman Catholic wing of the Thomas Christians has only recently begun to emancipate itself from foreign domination. Their emancipation is bound to take a long time, since their whole training is in western theology, spirituality, and culture. It should be easier for the Syrian Orthodox to develop a truly indigenous Indian Christianity, since the eastern tradition is much closer to the soul and spirit of India.

It is a strange thing to say, but it seems conceivable, that the Christianity that St. Thomas planted in India may perhaps truly come to flower only in the 21st century! If we do a little bit of manuring and cultivation for the Church now, during the years 1970 to 2000, it may be possible for the Syrian Orthodox Church to give the lead to the other Christians in India in developing a vital form of Indian Christianity in the next century.

Such cultivation means:

1. Refusing to deploy our energies for the futile arguments, power struggles and prestige contests now going on in the Church.
2. Giving maximum attention to preparing a large number of dedicated, learned, and disciplined priests.
3. Developing a monastic movement by rediscovering the spirituality and pattern of Basilian monasticism.
4. Creating sufficient activities that will permit our laymen and laywomen (including youth and students) to have a deeper Knowledge of and commitment to Christ.

We have only recently begun to have a full complement of bishops to constitute a real episcopal synod in India. It will take a few more generations before the bishops develop sufficient experience and calibre to make the episcopal synod a truly pioneering instrument of the Holy Spirit's work in Christ's Church.

Meanwhile, the manuring and cultivation must go on. It is man who plants and man who waters, but God gives the increase. St. Thomas planted. Many have watered. God will not fail to give the increase, provided we are faithful to Christ.