

# Chaldean Syrian Christians in Kerala

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**Summary:** *The Chaldean Christians in Kerala are part of the larger Syrian Christian Community. This article traces the historical processes over centuries that led to the emergence of this community as a distinct Church in Kerala.*

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## Chaldean Syrian Christians in Kerala

Christianity reached South India through Kerala in the first centuries of its origin and development. The popular legend that Apostle St. Thomas spread Christianity in Kerala is prevalent among Malayali Christians. The earliest Christians were referred to as Syrian Christians due to their connection to Eastern Christianity, with Syriac/Aramaic as their liturgical language. These early Christian communities were multi-ethnic and included native Indians, whom Saint Thomas may have baptised, and members of the different trading diasporas of Jews and Christian settlers who came later.<sup>1</sup>

One of the earliest sects of Syrian Christians was the Chaldean Christians, also known as Nestorians, affiliated with the Church of the East. The church, otherwise known as the Persian Church, is situated in the Persian Empire. While the term 'Chaldean' is used in the Middle East to refer to the Christians affiliated with Rome, it relates to the Nestorian group based in Kerala in the Indian context. The community, now based in Thrissur, was brought to the city in 1796 by the monarch of Cochin, Sakthan Thampuran, as a trading group that built their church in 1814 (locally known as Marth Mariam Valiya Pali).

The Church of the East in India uses the Liturgy of Addai (a disciple of St. Thomas) and Mari (a disciple of Addai). Most portions of the liturgy are used in the Malayalam translation for the benefit of the worshippers. However, priests recite some prayers in the original Aramaic language. Hence, the text of the liturgy is printed in two languages.

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<sup>1</sup> Simonton, Edward. 'A Concise History of the Nasrani Christians of Kerala and the Continuation of the Church of the East in India'. An Introduction to the Ancient Eastern Christianity, 2012, p. 6.

## Origin of the Syrian Christian Community in Kerala

Along with the legend of the Apostle Thomas, an alternative view is that Christianity was introduced to India by the East Syrian traders who came to the Malabar Coast during the first century. Both legends confirm the existence of a Christian church with an East Syrian connection on the southwest coast of Malabar within the first few centuries of the common era. There are two accounts of the emigration of the East Syrian traders.

The first account is about the visit of Thomas of Cana (a Syrian merchant who brought East Syrian Christian merchants and clergymen). The second concerns two bishops, Mar Sabrisho and Mar Pirus, sent by the Nestorian Patriarch in 823 AD.<sup>2</sup> The copper plates issued by Sthanu Ravi as grants to Christians and Jews are considered proof of the existence of East Syrian Christians as one of the donees in a colony of settlers from Persia, probably under the guidance of Nestorian leaders under Mar Sabrisho and Mar Pirus. To quote church historian K.K. Kuruvila:

This evidence and the names of bishops who visited Malabar during this period prove that the church was in ecclesiastical connection with the Nestorian church in Persia.<sup>3</sup>

There is evidence of Western visitors to mediaeval India who connected with the East Syrian Church, such as the Italian trader Nicolo de Conti. He records the existence of 1000 Nestorians who lived around the Church of St. Thomas in Mylapore, while another traveller, Ludovico di Varthema, speaks about the Christians at Kayamkulam who were visited by a priest from Babylon every three years to baptise

<sup>2</sup> Mingana, Alphonse. 'The Early Spread of Christianity in India'. *The John Rylands Library* 10, no. 2 (1926): 435–514.

<sup>3</sup> Kuruvilla, K.K. *A History of the Mar Thoma Church and Its Doctrines*. Vol. V. Indian Research Series. Madras: The Christian Literature Society for India, 1950, p. 2.

them. Another traveller, Paoli, records that these Christians did not worship images (as the Church of the East abhorred the use of images and statues, a practice continued in Marth Mariam Church) and used palm wine, locally known as arrack, during their holy mass.<sup>4</sup> When the Portuguese arrived in Kappad in 1498, the Church in Malabar was Syrian and was being visited by bishops from Persia/Babylon. There is evidence that East Syrian liturgy was used in Kerala in the early days of Christianity, and the Syrian Church in Kerala was undivided until the advent of the Portuguese.

## The Arrival of the Portuguese

Vasco Da Gama landed in Kerala in 1498, and attempts to convert the Syrian Christians to Latin Catholicism started in 1504. Goa was the base for the Portuguese invaders and the Latin Catholic Diocese in India. The Portuguese missionaries aimed to take control of the Syrian Christian communities and change their religious practices and liturgical language from Syriac to Latin.<sup>5</sup> They aimed to establish a seminary to affiliate the Malayali Christians with the authority in Rome. These persistent attempts gained strength under Jesuit missionaries like Francis Xavier, who established a branch of the Latin Catholic Diocese in Malabar.

They blocked all the Syrian bishops coming from the Middle East and placed the Syrian Christians under a Latin-Portuguese bishop. During this tumultuous period, in 1552, the contemporary bishop of the Nestorians in Kerala, Mar Yakob, died. This led to a long absence of Persian bishops in Malabar because the Portuguese captured, imprisoned, and even killed the bishops who travelled to Kerala. The constant attack on the Nestorian priests and the absence of a leader helped the Portuguese convert a

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<sup>4</sup> Aprem, Mar. 'The History of the Assyrian Church of the East in the 20th Century with Special Reference to the Syriac Literature in Kerala'. In *The Harp*, edited by Geevarghese Panicker, Jacob Thekeparampil, and Abraham Kalakudi, 253–64. Piscataway, NJ, USA: Gorgias Press, 2011.

large number of Syrian Christians to Latin Catholicism. Five bishops reached Kerala after the Portuguese brutally tortured Mar Yakob, and Mar Abraham was able to control the Syrian Diocese only nominally.<sup>6</sup>

In 1597, Mar Abraham died, leaving the administration in the hands of Archdeacon George. The Portuguese used this incident as an opportunity to hold power over the community when they did not have a bishop.<sup>7</sup> This was when Alexis De Menezes, the Archbishop of Goa, played a great role in calling the Synod of Diamper.

## Synod of Diamper

The Synod of Diamper was held on 20 June 1599, in Udayamperoor. The Archbishop of Goa, Alexis de Menezes, who presided over the Synod, aimed to eliminate the Nestorian influence in the Indian Church. Many decrees of the Synod were meant to bring the Syrian liturgy and practices into conformity with those of the Latin rite.

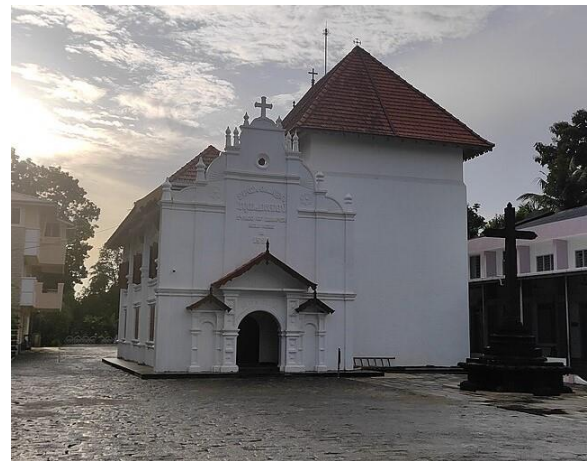


Figure 1. The Church in Udayamperoor where the Synod was held. Image: Wikimedia Commons, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Abraham, Arun Thomas. 'Synod of Diamper: Significance and Contributions in the History of Christianity in India'. *Christianity in the Middle East*, no. 4 (2019): 48.

<sup>6</sup> Aprem, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Abraham, 2019.

In Session II Decree I, Menezes condemned the “diabolical and perverse heresy” of the Nestorian Church.<sup>8</sup> He added, “Calling the Patriarch of Babylon, the universal pastor and head of the Catholic Church in all places,” is an act of heresy. The Synod commanded all the Catholic priests and followers to deliver all the books written in Syriac to the Metropolitan so that they could be “perused and corrected or destroyed.” The Syrians and their leader, Archdeacon George, had to acquiesce to these decisions. Thus, most of the books that contained the history of the Persian Church were destroyed as the Indian Church was incorporated as a part of the Western Church. Only four manuscripts from before 1599 are known to exist today in India. One is a Kashkul, copied in 1585 AD at Kothamangalam and transcribed by an Indian priest.<sup>9</sup> It is preserved in the Metropolitan Palace in Thrissur.

Along with the prohibition and destruction of books, some of the decisions were detrimental to the culture of the East Syrian Church. The ban on marital relations and other practices like concubinage and polygamy among priests forced the priests to abandon their existing families, fearing exclusion by the church.<sup>10</sup> The Synod banned rituals and traditions similar to the local traditions of Kerala as a move to radicalise the church. However, church historians interpret these decisions as being born out of ignorance of the indigenous customs of Malayali Christians instead of being a purification of Christian rules.<sup>11</sup> Due to the Synod, some people left the Syrian Church to join the path of Latin Catholicism.

## Coonan Cross Oath

The Synod of Diamper imposed the authoritarian rule of the Portuguese Padrado, which infuriated the Syrian Christians. After the death of Archdeacon

George in 1637, his nephew Thomas assumed leadership, and a spirit of revolt seized the Syrians. The revolt happened in 1653 after a Mesopotamian bishop, Ahatalla, arrived in India. Thousands of Syrians gathered at Mattancherry, demanding to see the bishop, but the Portuguese sent him off to Goa, and news spread of the death of the bishop by drowning in the sea. The angry crowd assembled near the Portuguese fort swore not to obey the dictates of the Archbishop of Goa and the Latin hierarchy, holding on to ropes tied to a huge granite cross there.<sup>12</sup> The oath is known as the Coonan Cross Oath, a protest against Latinization and a defiant plea for the Syriac rite.



Figure 2. The depiction of the Coonan Cross Oath at Marth Mariam Valiya Palli. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024

A few months later, twelve church elders ordained Archdeacon Thomas as Mar Thoma I, forming a new group called Puthenloor, who dissociated themselves from the Catholic Church. The remaining group, including the current Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, was called Pazhayakuttukar.

In 1665, the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch sent Mar Gregorius Abdul Jaleel to Kerala. He was welcomed by the West Syrian faction of the Puthenloor group and led to the association between St. Thomas Christians and the West Syrian Church. This

<sup>8</sup> Aprem, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Kashukul (“including all” in Syriac) is a collection of prayers for ordinary days.

<sup>10</sup> Abraham, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Abraham, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Johny, P.D. ‘The Oath of the “Coonan Cross” (Leaning Cross), Mattancherry, Cochin, January 16, 1653, A.D.— Its Socio-Political Background’. *Indian History Congress* 61 (2000): 458.

further led to the emergence of a new community called the Jacobites, who accepted the liturgy of Mar Gregorious.

After this, the Chaldeans strived to hold on to their East Syrian roots and consolidate themselves as a separate faction affiliated with the Church of the East. This initiative materialised with the settlement of 52 Chaldean families in Thrissur and the establishment of the Marth Mariam Chaldean Church.

### Marth Mariam Chaldean Church

After the attack of Tipu Sultan in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the famous Shakthan Thampuran of the erstwhile Cochin state decided to improve commerce by developing Trichur town.<sup>13</sup> In 1796, he brought 52 Christian families from the neighbourhood of Trichur to improve the trade situation. In 1814, the Marth Mariam Valiya Pali was built in Trichur for the Chaldean Syrians from Ollur, Aranatukara, Kottekad, Arimbur, and other places. The following year, the church was consecrated by Fr. Abraham Palai in accordance with the royal charter of the Maharaja, using the Chaldean Syrian rite.



Figure 3. The Marth Mariam Valiya Palli was built in 1814 by the Chaldean traders of Thrissur, who came to the city in 1796. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024

<sup>13</sup> Mookan, Mar Aprem. 'Assyrian Church of the East in Trichur, India'. *Church of Beth Kokheh Journal* 1 (4 August 2016).

The church, established with the cooperation of the Maharaja of Cochin and other Hindu overlords in the region, eventually incorporated secular practices with the Hindu temples. For instance, the church donates oil to Parmekavu Temple during Thrissur Pooram.<sup>14</sup> In exchange, the temple donates an ornamental umbrella, which is traditionally used in temples in Kerala, for the annual church festival.<sup>15</sup> Thus, this church was established as the Indian base of the Church of the East while connected to Kerala's religious institutions and local practices.

### The Emergence of the Chaldean Community

The Chaldean Patriarch Joseph Audo VI played a significant role in the Thrissur East Syrian community's history. His influence on the church began with the arrival of Mar Roccas, whom he sent to India at the request of East Syrian lay leaders who wanted a bishop. Mar Roccas, who arrived in Trichur in 1861, was received by parishes from Trichur, Ollur, and Aranatukara. This decision was opposed by Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the founder of the Syrian Romanist congregation, the Third Order of Discalced Carmelites, which later became CMI—the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate. The Vatican successfully put enough pressure on the Patriarch to agree to withdraw him. Mar Roccas was forcibly put on a boat at Cochin and sent back to Mesopotamia.

Mar Roccas was joined by Father Anthony Thondanata, who was later consecrated as the Metropolitan Mar Abdisho by the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Church of the East, Mar Rewul Shimun. Mar Abdisho returned to Cochin in 1863. Yet, the community that had encouraged him to go with Mar Roccas refused to accept him. They forced him to shave his beard, the sign of his elevation, and he returned to work as

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Fr. K.R. Inasu, the Vicar of Marth Mariam Valiya Palli, on 28 February 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Inasu, 28 February 2024.

a parish priest in the State of Travancore.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, the community in Thrissur, ignorant of Mar Abdisho's return, continued to seek an East Syrian bishop.

In 1870, Mar Mellus was sent to the Metropolitan of Malabar and India to seek out Mar Abdisho. He recognised Abdisho's rank despite the dispute between the Chaldean Patriarch and the Nestorian Catholicos-Patriarch in Persia. Mar Abdisho then worked with Mar Mellus until the latter was recalled to Mesopotamia eight years later after the death of the Chaldean Patriarch. In 1875, the Catholicos-Patriarch sent Mar Philip Jacob Abraham to join Mellus in Thrissur. He worked with him until he was kidnapped in 1877 by the Vicar Apostolic of Bombay, Monsignor Meurin. Therefore, the dispute over having a consecrated leader persisted in the Chaldean Church.

## Consolidation of the Chaldean Community

Under the leadership of Mar Abimalek Timotheus in 1908, the Church was consolidated as an independent faction devoid of external influence. His predecessor, Cor-episcopa Michael Augustine, issued a legal suit against him in 1911, which lasted until 1925. The suit claimed that 1) Mar Timotheus could only exercise authority after the death of Cor-episcopal Michael Augustine and 2) the new Metropolitan must conform to the current customs of the now 'Independent Chaldean' community and not change anything.<sup>17</sup> This was significant because the worship in the cathedral did not conform to all the practices of the Church of the East. For example, the Cathedral had statues and crucifixes, whereas the Church of the East members abhor images and display only plain Persian crosses with no corpus. They possess neither statues nor icons. This situation forced Abimalek Timotheus to conduct mass outside the Cathedral until

the statues were removed. These statues are now preserved as relics in the Church Museum. Father K.R. Inasu states,

The statues are a form of art that shouldn't be destroyed and should be preserved as a part of history.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 4. Mar Timotheus, bishop of the Eastern Syrian Church, en route to India in disguise to escape violence by the Catholics during the early 20th century. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024

Mar Abimalek Timotheus was awarded rights in 1925 by the British Resident, and the community was consolidated into an independent congregation.

## The Schism within the Chaldean Church

When the Catholicos-Patriarch in Baghdad issued a universal order to adopt the Gregorian calendar in March 1964, the Church of the East split between the Old Calendarists and the New Calendarists due to the strain of the new decision. In September 1968, the Old Calendarists elected Mar Darmo as their Catholicos-Patriarch, and he left India permanently. After arriving in Baghdad, he consecrated Mar Poulouse Episcopa and Mar Aprem

<sup>16</sup> Simonton, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Simonton, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Inasu, 28 February 2024.

Metropolitan for India before he died in 1969.

The Old Calendarists were represented by Mar Aprem, who returned to India after his consecration, while the New Calendarists only received a bishop in 1971, when a layman was ordained to all orders and made Metropolitan—Mar Timotheus. He arrived in Thrissur in 1972. Both the new Metropolitans were natives of Thrissur and Indians, a decision opted for during the second half of the 20th century after years of rule under foreign bishops.

The New Calendarists' patriarch abolished episcopal celibacy, then promptly married, and, thus, was deposed. After his reinstatement, he was assassinated by an aggrieved family member. In 1976, Mar Dinkha IV was chosen by the Holy Synod of the New Calendarists as the first non-hereditary Catholicos-Patriarch after almost 500 years. One of Mar Dinkha IV's first actions was an attempt to end the schism in India. After failed attempts at arbitration, he visited Thrissur in 1991 and was again unsuccessful. Finally, after years of dialogue, litigation, and negotiation, the two groups were united in 1995, headed by Mar Aprem as Metropolitan. Mar Timotheus was made Apostolic Delegate to India, a post he held until he died in 2001. Mar Aprem continues as Metropolitan to this day.

## Administration of the Chaldean Church

The religious heads of the church followed a strict hierarchy starting from the Patriarch, who leads the global community of Chaldean Syrian Christians. He is assisted by the Metropolitan, who heads a regional diocese of the church, and intermediary leaders, including the Archdeacon and Episcopa. The vicars under this church were allowed to marry and lead a domestic life, while the top religious leaders had to practice celibacy.

Chaldean Syrian Christians are distinct for their democratic mode of administration,

where the council members of the diocese, barring the religious leaders, are elected by the church's followers.



Figure 5. Mar Darmo with his congregation in the mid-1960s. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024

## Conclusion

Based in Thrissur, the Church of the East has only 30,000 members out of India's estimated 75 lakh Syrian Christians (or St. Thomas Christians/Nasranis). The Church is spread around India in major cities like Chennai, Mumbai, and Bengaluru. Despite its struggle to maintain its unique identity, the community is smaller than its Syrian counterparts. Intermarriages with other Christian communities are common due to the fewer numbers. The Marth Mariam Valia Palli represents the endurance and resilience of a community to sustain itself while accepting and adopting the local traditions of Kerala.

## Acknowledgement

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