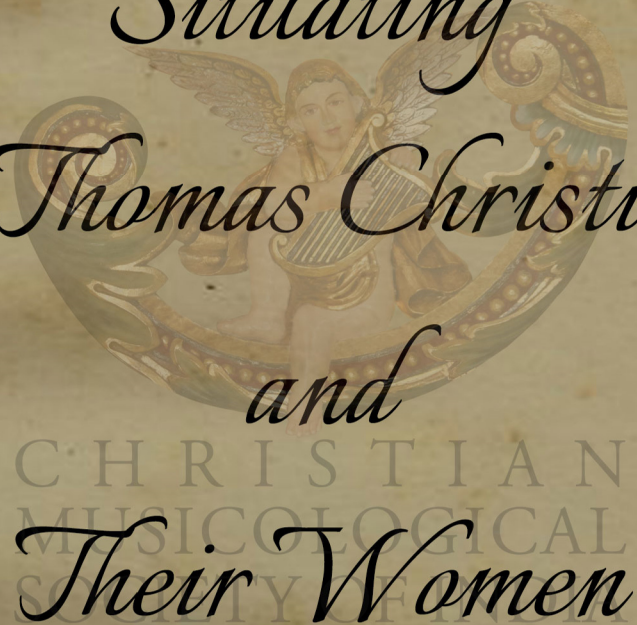


CHAPTER II

Situating
St. Thomas Christians
and
Their Women

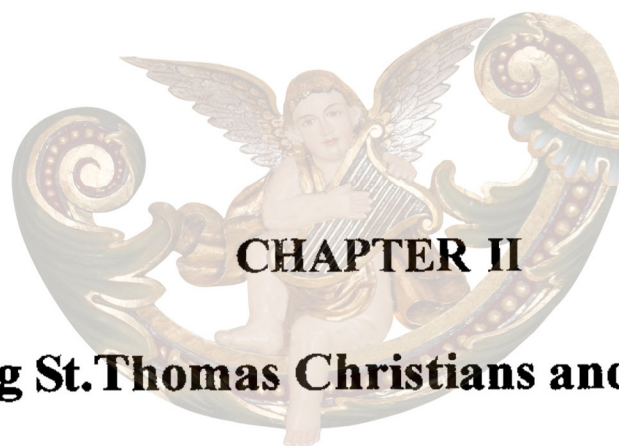


CHRISTIAN
MUSICOLOGICAL
SOCIETY OF INDIA

P. J. JOSEPH



CHRISTIAN
MUSICOLOGICAL
SOCIETY OF INDIA



CHAPTER II

Situating St. Thomas Christians and their Women

CHRISTIAN
MUSICOLOGICAL
SOCIETY OF INDIA



Chapter II

Situating St. Thomas Christians and Their Women

The introductory chapter discussed briefly the origin and development of Women's Studies including Feminist Spirituality and Theology and the subsequent space it created in the realm of academic studies. The attempts to understand spirituality and theology that the nuns of St. Thomas Christians developed so as to express their womanhood, require a historical contextualization and analysis of the circumstances, against which the various Women Religious Congregations took shape in Kerala.

This Chapter deals with the various aspects of the community life of the St. Thomas Christians who trace their origin back to the Apostle St. Thomas. This study intended as a backdrop to the later chapters because from St. Thomas Christian Community of Kerala all the six indigenous Women Religious Congregations originated. Hence an attempt is made to trace the social, cultural, economic and religious life of the St. Thomas Christians in detail. Here it is necessary to highlight the aspects of colonial dominance of the ecclesiastical authorities, especially the domination of the Western Latin Church over the indigenous St. Thomas Christian Community. An attempt is also made to study the reactions of St. Thomas Christians against this foreign intervention and the efforts made by them to get indigenous bishops who belonged to their own *rite*. The background is set by studying and comparing the four



newly emerged dioceses and its contributions to the growth of Syro-Malabar Church.

The Shaping of the Community of St. Thomas Christian

The Indian Oriental Catholic Church of India or the Syro-Malabar Church,¹ according to strong living tradition, was founded by the Apostle Thomas.² Down the centuries, this Church has been called '*The Church of St. Thomas*' and the Christians, '*The Thomas Christians*'.³ Till the

¹ The term Syro-Malabar Church came into general use only by the middle of the nineteenth century, when it was used to distinguish the community of St. Thomas Christians subject to the prelates of the Latin jurisdiction in Malabar from the Syro-Chaldeans. Giamil, *Genuinae Relations*, Rome, 1902, cited by Andrews Thazhath, *Juridical Sources...Op.cit.*, p.2. Podipara, *Hierarchy...Op.cit.*, p.15. Different appellations are alleged to have been applied to the St. Thomas Christians. *Nazrani*, a local derivation of the word '*Nazarene*', which the orthodox Jews gave to the nascent Christian sect, have generally been the community's accepted designation in official record. The name *St. Thomas Christians* is seen for the first time in the *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum of Bar Hebrew*. This Apostolic heritage has been generally acknowledged in India, both in the ecclesiastical and civil circles despite its lack of written documents. The Thomas Christians, known also as '*Nazrani Mappilas*' (noble Christians), by tradition trace their beginnings as the subjects of the Chera chiefdom whose capital was *Muziris*. With the coming of the western Latin Church, St. Thomas Christians gradually came to be called *Syrians/Surianikkar*. Now they are called the *Malabar Catholics, Malabarians, Syrian Catholics and Syro-Malabarians*. The term *Syro-Malabar* denotes ancient Catholic community in the whole of India. The Syro-Malabarians are not Syrians racially or culturally but only by *rite*. The term *syro* prefixed to their name signifies only that they use the East Syrian or Chaldean language for liturgical purposes. As has been attested to by eminent scholars, both native and foreign, this community has the distinction of being the most ancient Christians in India and the Far East. The use of the term '*Syro-Malabar Church*' is seen for the first time in the writings of the missionaries in 1788. The Catholic Thomas Christians were separated from the Latins by the establishment of Apostolic Vicariate in 1887 and a "Hierarchy" was erected for them in 1923. Thus their 'Church' and 'Hierarchy' were called The '*Syro-Malabar Church*' and the '*Syro-Malabar Hierarchy*' respectively. APF, SOCG, Vol. 878. f. 104. For details see, Andrews Thazhath, *Juridical Sources...Op.cit.*, Chapters V and VI. The word '*Syro*' referred to the liturgical language of Syriac (East Syria:).

² Apostle Thomas is one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ. Holy Bible St. John: 11/16; 14/2-6; 20/20-29.

³ Bishop Francis Roz. S. J., the first Latin prelate over the Thomas Christians, after studying their ancient books and traditions, writes in the beginning of the seventeenth century that the Church in India was always called *The Church of St.*



of our Lady, the Vigils of the feasts of Apostles – Mathias, Peter, Paul, Jacob, Bartholomew, Mathew, Simon and Jude, Andrew - and John the Baptist, the Vigil of the feast of Holy Cross, and all the Saints. If any of these falls on Monday, the abstinence from meat will not be on Sunday but on Friday or Saturday. If the Nativity of our Lord falls on Friday or Saturday, the abstinence of that day is not observed.

According to the regulations of the church, all those who are between 21 and 61 years are bound to fast, the violation of which will be a mortal sin. In these days meat, fish, egg and products of milk are forbidden and only one meal a day is allowed. Those who are not bound to fast are, however, expected to abstain from the above said food items.¹⁶⁴ According to the teachings of the church, Christians should abstain from heavy work on Saturdays and Sundays and those days should be spent in liturgy, reading of scriptures and Holy Mass.

Prayer is the unifying force of every family. Popular devotions contribute to revitalize the piety and spirituality of the people. It is one of the ways through which the uneducated, illiterate came into contact with Christian spirituality. Thomas Christians were great devotees of Blessed Virgin Mary. Marian devotion has a special place in the spiritual life of the Thomas Christians. About this very ancient spiritual tradition Pananathanam makes the following observations:

¹⁶⁴ Moolakkatt, *The Book of Decrees...., Op.cit.*, p20. Ibid.



“The Malabarians cultivated deep filial devotions towards the Mother of God from the time immemorial. Wednesday was consecrated and specially set apart as “Marian Day”, as Saturday is in the Latin Church. On that day all kept perfect abstinence in her honour. In churches the Divine office was sung in her honour with the active participation of the faithful.”¹⁶⁵

The confraternity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was started at the St. Theresa chapel at Kuruvilangad.¹⁶⁶ This is a model and each and every church had confraternity of Our Lady. Devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary during the month of May is another popular devotion.¹⁶⁷ There would be no house where the rosary with the Litany of Loreto was not recited in honour of Blessed Virgin Mary.

St. Thomas Christians take earnest interest to participate in the Eucharistic liturgy. The devotion to Holy Eucharist is deep rooted in the minds of the Thomas Christians. They worship Holy Eucharist in the Blessed Sacrament. They believe in the living presence of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. The Catholic Church teaches the faithful regarding the importance of this sacrament and reminds them to receive Holy Communion. Fr. Chavara was a great devotee of Holy Eucharist. He preached and propagated the devotion to Blessed Sacrament in the form of Eucharist. Public exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and adoration were a common feature of the Catholic faith. The *One Hour Adoration*

¹⁶⁵ Paranthanam, *Mellano 72*, cited in *Moolakat, The Book of Decrees...*, *Op.cit.*, p. 106.

¹⁶⁶ Thazath, ‘*Juridical Sources...*’, *Op.cit.*, p. 171.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 212 - 213.



(Holy Hour), Thirteen Hours Adoration, Forty Hours Adoration, etc. are pious and devotional exercises that gained wide acceptance in the Malabar church. The *Forty Hours Adoration*, first started at Mannanam, in 1866 has become an annual feature of all important parishes in Kerala.¹⁶⁸ Devotion to sacred Heart of Jesus is another popular devotion practised in the Malabar Church.

This chapter gives an overview of the life of St. Thomas Christians, analysing their socio-cultural, economic, religious and spiritual aspects. It has also discussed the various changes brought in this Community by the intervention of the western missionaries and the Latin Church and the subsequent break in the Church with the Synod of Diamper. As a result of the continuous fight against the colonial ecclesiastical authorities, the St. Thomas Christians got bishops who belonged to their own 'rite' and land. No doubt, with the indigenization of the Ecclesiastical structure of the St. Thomas Christians, there appeared a shift in the priorities upheld by the Church, which ultimately favoured an atmosphere for the emergence of various Women Religious Congregations.

¹⁶⁸ Valerian, *The first Indian Saint...*, *Op.cit.*, p.41.



C H R I S T I A N
MUSICOLOGICAL
SOCIETY OF INDIA

For further information
regarding this text

Please contact

library@thecmsindia.org

Please join the
'CMSI Benefactors Club'
and support the ongoing projects of
Christian Musicological Society Of India

-
- DIGITAL LIBRARY • ARAMAIC PROJECT
 - ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SYRIAC CHANTS
 - MUSIC ICONOGRAPHY • CHRISTIAN ART
 - RESOURCE FOR RESEARCHERS