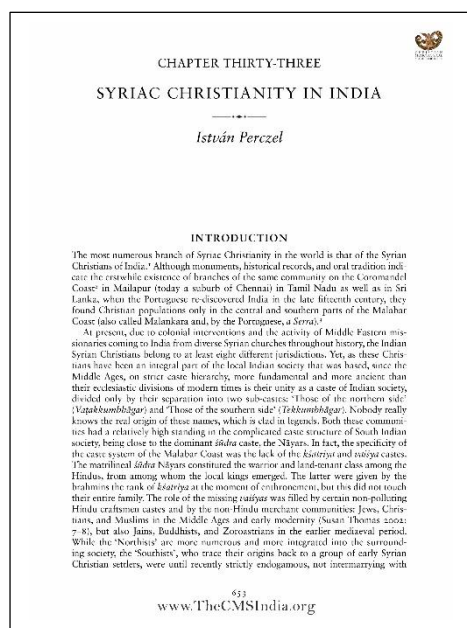


Syriac Christianity in India



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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA

István Perczel

INTRODUCTION

The most numerous branch of Syriac Christianity in the world is that of the Syrian Christians of India.¹ Although monuments, historical records, and oral tradition indicate the erstwhile existence of branches of the same community on the Coromandel Coast² in Mailapur (today a suburb of Chennai) in Tamil Nadu as well as in Sri Lanka, when the Portuguese re-discovered India in the late fifteenth century, they found Christian populations only in the central and southern parts of the Malabar Coast (also called Malankara and, by the Portuguese, *a Serra*).³

At present, due to colonial interventions and the activity of Middle Eastern missionaries coming to India from diverse Syrian churches throughout history, the Indian Syrian Christians belong to at least eight different jurisdictions. Yet, as these Christians have been an integral part of the local Indian society that was based, since the Middle Ages, on strict caste hierarchy, more fundamental and more ancient than their ecclesiastic divisions of modern times is their unity as a caste of Indian society, divided only by their separation into two sub-castes: ‘Those of the northern side’ (*Vaṭakkumbhāgar*) and ‘Those of the southern side’ (*Tekkumbhāgar*). Nobody really knows the real origin of these names, which is clad in legends. Both these communities had a relatively high standing in the complicated caste structure of South Indian society, being close to the dominant *śūdra* caste, the Nāyars. In fact, the specificity of the caste system of the Malabar Coast was the lack of the *kṣātriya* and *vaiśya* castes. The matrilineal *śūdra* Nāyars constituted the warrior and land-tenant class among the Hindus, from among whom the local kings emerged. The latter were given by the brahmins the rank of *kṣātriya* at the moment of enthronement, but this did not touch their entire family. The role of the missing *vaiśyas* was filled by certain non-polluting Hindu craftsmen castes and by the non-Hindu merchant communities: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Middle Ages and early modernity (Susan Thomas 2002: 7–8), but also Jains, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians in the earlier mediaeval period. While the ‘Northists’ are more numerous and more integrated into the surrounding society, the ‘Southists’, who trace their origins back to a group of early Syrian Christian settlers, were until recently strictly endogamous, not intermarrying with

anyone, including their Northist fellow Christians, and boast that they are thereby preserving pure Semitic blood.⁴ While both sub-castes belonged to the same church organisation, their churches and clergy were strictly separated, which fact had greatly scandalised the Portuguese missionaries, who tried in vain to unite the two ‘sides’.

According to the data released by the churches, this community numbers altogether around eight million members (Menachery-Balakrishnan-Perczel 2014: 582–91). They are being called Syrian Christians (*surīyāni nasrāṇikal*), Saint Thomas Christians (*Mār Tōma nasrāṇikal*), or Māppilla Christians (*nasrāṇi māppillamar*). Yet, originally they seem to have called themselves simply ‘Christians’ (*nasrāṇikal*), as there were no other Christians in India from whom they needed to distinguish themselves. Nevertheless, as the above denominations reveal important aspects of the history and the life of the community, it is convenient to begin with these.

THE NAMES OF THE GROUPS

Syrian Christians

The mother tongue of the indigenous, pre-colonial Indian Christians is Malayalam, a Dravidian language akin to Tamil, Kannada, and Telugu. Yet they identify themselves as Syrian Christians, because, before their forced submission by the Portuguese colonisers to the Roman Catholic Church, they had belonged to the Church of the East, that is, to the Persian Church. Even the Malayalam name for Syrian Christian (*Su iyāni*) is borrowed from the Persian *Soryāni*, meaning the Christian ethnicity of the Sasanian Empire. The forced Latinisation had made these Christians forget to a certain extent their Persian origins but had only reinforced their feeling of Syrian identity. They cherished Syriac as their liturgical language and, also, the language of their theology and elite culture, and revered as their teachers (*malpān*, plural: *malpānmar*, from the Syriac *malpāna*) and leaders those local priests who knew good Syriac. The cultivation of Syriac constituted their principal connecting link and opening towards the West Asian mother churches and thus served, besides its liturgical use, as the *lingua franca* for official correspondence with the representatives of those churches.

Furthermore, as the Syrian Christians constituted a relatively high caste of Indian society (bearing in mind that they ranked below the *śūdra* Nāyars), Syriac also played a role analogous to that of Sanskrit among the Brahmins: that of a sacred literary language, the good knowledge of which was one of the constituting factors of the community’s priestly elite (Perczel 2009). After the arrival of the Portuguese colonisers following Vasco da Gama’s discoveries in 1498, the European missionaries had to deal with this situation. Before long, they had to recognise that, if they wanted their missionary work to be successful, they had to carry it on in Syriac. Thus, Syriac became the main linguistic vehicle of Catholic missions too. Recent research by the SRITE project⁵ has uncovered a large quantity of early modern literature written in Syriac, produced in India by Western missionaries, mainly by Jesuits. Moreover, while a Franciscan attempt to educate Roman Catholic priests in Latin-speaking seminaries inevitably failed (Thekkedath 1988: 34–6), from 1587 onwards the Jesuits trained their seminarians in Syriac at Vaipicotta Seminary in Chennamangalam, a decision that was accompanied by much success (Thekkedath 1988: 56–9, 86–90).



Figure 33.2 Pilgrimage to the Mount of Malayathur

Source: István Perczel

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privileges are given to a community centred on a place of worship. Similar expressions are used in Cēra grants given to Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain communities. This is also evidence for the official acceptance of the worship conducted in the *Tarisā* sanctuary.

It is said in the grant that the church (or the church community) was founded by one Maruvān Sapir Īsō, whose name is a Persian-Syriac composite. Maruvān is a common Persian name, often used by Christians (Gignoux, Jullien and Jullien 2009: 98), Īsō is the East Syriac pronunciation of Jesus, a name much used among the Nestorian Christians, while *sapir* means ‘learned’, ‘erudite’ in Syriac. Thus, the name probably means Maruvān Jesus, the Learned one. This name has been often identified with the East Syrian name Sabrisho‘, ‘Hope in Jesus’, but this is contradicted by the other variant, in which it is found in the inscription, *Ēsō da-Tapir āyi*. This seems to be a Syriac-Malayalam composite: *Ēsō* (Syriac: Jesus), *da* (Syriac: who), *Tapir* (Syriac, to be read as *Sapir*: learned), *āyi* (Malayalam: is): ‘Jesus, who is [the] Learned’. The name Sabrisho‘, usually used as a name for clerics, could not be written this way.²⁷

It is understood that the privileges are witnessed by Muslim, Christian, Zoroastrian, and Jewish witnesses. The Muslims sign in Arabic written in Kufic script, the Christians and the Zoroastrians in Middle Persian written in Pahlavi characters, and the Jews in Early Judaeo-Persian written in Hebrew script (Cereti 2009). This shows that, by the mid-ninth century, the languages of the trans-Arabian Sea maritime trade were Arabic and Persian, the latter being shared by the three religious communities.

The God venerated in the church is referred to as *tevar*, ‘deity’, without any specification of who this deity is. In fact, the copper plates are not a religious but a purely legal document, which is given to receive a rich foreign merchant community, to settle them, and to give them the traditional privileges of the Malankara aristocracy. In the local Christian tradition, Sapir Īsō is remembered as a rich merchant who settled in Kollam and brought with him two bishops with Persian names, Mar Šābūhr and Mar Afrahāt (Marxabro and Marprohd in the Portuguese documents),²⁸ who were to be venerated as the great saints of the Malankara Church and to whom many churches were dedicated (Gouvea 1606: 5r; Malekandathil 2003: 21–2; Mundadan 1984: 103–7).

What was the occasion for the arrival of this new settler community? Antonio Gouvea says that they arrived ‘a few years after the founding of the city of Coulão’ (Kollam) (Gouvea 1606: 4v–5r; Malekandathil 2003: 20–1). From this narrative, we learn that the colony of Maruvān Sapir Īsō came after the founding of Kollam, whence the Malayalam era starts. Apparently, Kollam was founded in 825 as a new port city, where the king invited foreign merchants, Muslim Arabs, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews to settle. So, most probably, the founding and building of the *Tarisāppalli* is posterior to 825 and should be dated around the 840s (Narayanan 1972: 32). Thus, the Malayalam era begins with the founding of a new port city by the emperor Stālu Ravi but is not connected to Sapir Īsō himself. Because of this, the view that is generally held, namely that Kollam was founded by Sapir Īsō, who arrived in the year 823, should be revised. So also should be revised the widespread misreading of the name Maruvān Sapir Īsō as Mar Sabrisho‘ and his identification with one of the bishops, Mar Šābūhr, based on one of the Portuguese



Figure 33.6 One of the Persian crosses in Kottayam

Source: Fabian da Costa

If one accepts the hypothesis, which has been formulated several times (Cereti, Olivieri and Vazhuthanapally 2002: 294), according to which all the other Persian crosses are replicas of the one in Mailapur, this phenomenon would stand in need of an explanation. Hypothetically, I would connect this to the spread or expulsion of the Persian Christian communities from Mailapur, which, when spreading to the Malabar Coast, reproduced a religious symbol that had been at the core of the community's worship in Mailapur. Thus, it seems that the verifiable written history of the Christian community on the Malabar Coast begins in the ninth century.

Apparently, even after the expulsion, Mailapur had preserved its symbolic importance, as Marco Polo in 1293 still reported on the veneration of the tomb of the Apostle, kept by Christian guardians (Marco Polo 1908: 363–5).

monasteries. The exemption from the taxes levied ‘on the right-handed and left-handed castes’ shows that the importance of these merchant communities for the local economy warranted their liberation from the local hierarchical order, so that they were granted almost complete autonomy, while the community’s religious freedom was fully respected.

This practice did not change much after the advent of the European colonisers. In 1796, Rāma Varma IX, the king of Kochi, also called Śaktan Tampurān (‘the Mighty Ruler’), founded the city of Thrissur, which he designed as a new trade centre. For so doing, he settled in Thrissur fifty-two Christian merchant families, of the Syrian Chaldean confession. In 1815 he built them a church and granted them freedom of religion and independence from the then ruling European hierarchy (Mar Aprem 1983: 30–5). This community became the kernel of the modern Nestorian Church of India.

We know even less about the liturgical and ecclesiastical life of the community in this period. As mentioned above, the first extant Syriac text that was written in Kerala dates from 1301 (MS Vat. syr. 22, Van der Ploeg 1983). This is a lectionary of the readings of the letters of St Paul for the whole year, according to the order followed in the church of Kokhe, the cathedral church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the see of the Nestorian catholicos-patriarchs of the East. It was copied in Kodungallur by a young deacon of fourteen years of age. All the other early Syriac manuscripts are from the sixteenth century and testify to the fact that the bishops coming from the Church of the East in the early modern period were bringing with them their own Syriac books, which were held in high esteem by the community.

The relationship of these communities with the Persian Church depended on the financial strength of the community concerned as well as on the linguistic skills of its elite. To have a normal church life, a bishop, or bishops, had to reside in India, to consecrate the holy orders who performed the liturgical practices, teach the clergy, and maintain contact with the mother church. The community had to pay for the mission to bring the bishop(s) from the headquarters of the Persian Church, and for gifts to the catholicos-patriarch; also, it had to cover the expenses of the bishops as long as they stayed in India. The recently discovered accounts of a mission sent to the Chaldean catholicos-patriarch Yoḥannān Hormizd in 1796 testify to the immense financial burden that all this laid on the community (Perczel 2013: 431–5). This resulted in the fact that contact with the mother church was intermittent. Portuguese sources relate that, until not long before the Portuguese arrived in India, there was a long period of interruption in these contacts, so much so that there were no priests left in the Indian Church, but only a deacon who was forced to celebrate the liturgy for the faithful (George of Christ 1578: DI XI, 130; Gouvea 1606: 5v–63; Malekandathil 2003: 25–6). It was from this state of affairs that, in 1490, a mission was sent to Gazarta d-Beth Zabday (modern Cüre in Eastern Turkey), to catholicos Šemʿon IV Basidi, with the participation of Deacon Joseph and a certain George, from the influential Pakalomattam family (fig 33.12). As a result, Joseph and George were consecrated priests and two bishops, Mar Thomas and Mar John, came to India (Vallavanthara 1984). Mar Thomas soon returned to Gazarta to carry home the gifts of the Indian faithful and was dispatched again in 1503 with three more bishops, Mar Jacob, Mar Yahbalāhā, and Mar Denḥā (Assemani 1725: III/1, 590–2). In Malabar, these bishops received the honorary name *Mārābhanmār* (Syro-Malayalam: from the Syriac



Figure 33.14 A granite plaque inscribed in Syriac and Malayalam, commemorating the finding of Mār Denḥā's bones in 1990, in the southern wall of the church. The Syriac inscription says: 'The holy relics of the venerable priest of Kadamattam, which were found here on the first day of the month of Adar (March) in the year 1990 of our Lord, are placed here.' Yet, the Malayalam only says: 'Here are the holy relics of a father found on the 1 March 1990.' The bones attributed to the Kadamattam priest, a famous magician, seem to be in fact those of Mār Denḥā

Source: Susan Visvanathan

whilst being open to the Jesuits and their accommodationist strategies, also clung to their cultural heritage, so that the texts and the cultural trends became combined and gave rise to a unique early modern culture, with Syriac as the lingua franca (Perczel 2009; Perczel 2018b).

The Jesuits had a complicated relationship with the East Syrian bishop who had emerged as the great leader of the St Thomas Christians during the second half of the sixteenth century: Mar Abraham, who came first to India before 1556 as a Nestorian bishop, and then, in 1563, joined the Chaldean patriarch Mar Abdisho IV (1555–1567), before going to Rome to visit the pope and receive a new consecration as a Chaldean bishop in 1565 (fig 33.17). Mar Abraham, who returned to India in 1568, transferred



Figure 33.21 Upper part of the open-air cross in Korathy, with Syriac inscriptions. On the upper cross-beam: “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” (Jn 19:19); on the trunk in-between the cross-beams: “Yah” – the East Syriac name for God; on the lower cross-beam: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). The usage on the crosses of these scriptural passages is a Latin influence, while the lack of the Corpus Christi and the divine name Yah belong to the East Syriac tradition. The earliest extant Syriac inscriptions date from the second half of the sixteenth century

Source: István Perczel

After the Portuguese

After this, a long period of strife and schism emerged. In 1663, the Dutch conquered Cochin and the Malabar Coast, ending the Portuguese hegemony which in turn meant the expulsion of the Jesuits. At that moment, an indigenous priest, Mar Parambil Cāndi Kuriētu (Alexandre de Campos) was consecrated as rival bishop for the Roman Catholics and, gradually, the community split into two (Thekkedath 1988: 100–9; Perczel 2016b: 50–1, 264–5). Mar Thoma finally obtained consecration from a Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) bishop, Mor Gregorios abd’al-Jalil, formerly abbot of Saint Mark’s Monastery and patriarch of Jerusalem, who came to India in 1665 and resided in North Paravur until his death in 1681. The Syrian Orthodox liturgy and customs were introduced by a subsequent mission by Mor Baselios Yaldo (fig 33.4) and Mor Iyovannis Hidayat Allah, which arrived in 1685. Subsequent missions from the Syrian Orthodox Church led to the gradual formation of a semi-independent community under the spiritual leadership of the Antiochian Syrian Orthodox patriarch under the de facto jurisdiction of the Pakalomattam Mar Thoma metropolitans, who bequeathed their office from uncle to nephew until the extinction of the family in 1809. This branch of the community is called the New Faction (*puttan kūru*), while

- 6 We have found and digitised the correspondence of Mar Timotheos and Placide Podipara, kept in the archives of Dharmaram College in Bangalore and of the Metropolitan's House in Thrissur.
- 7 The latest comprehensive study of great erudition, championing the historicity of the Indian apostolate of Saint Thomas, is Nedungatt 2008.
- 8 The placename Musiris is attested in ancient sources, such as the Musiris Papyrus or the Tabula Peutingeriana, the copy of a first-century Roman map. *Mucciri* is in fact a Dravidian word, meaning 'harelip' ('three lips') (Gundert 1872: 753). The name indicated the delta of the Periyar river, where Musiris was situated. The delta and the port of Musiris were destroyed by a tsunami in 1341 CE, which led to the rise of Kozhikode and Kochi as the new centres of international maritime trade.
- 9 This is Papyrus Vindobonensis Graecus 40822 from the first century CE, from Berenike or Myos Hormos at the Red Sea, containing the renewal of an original contract made in Musiris. The merchant took a loan for purchasing his products, which he warrants with the whole value of the cargo remaining after payment of taxes. The products are brought from Musiris by an Egyptian ship called Hermapollon. The papyrus is a witness to the intense trade relations between India and the Mediterranean, and also to the fact that Greek was the international language of trade along these routes (Casson 1990; De Romanis 2012).
- 10 *Maliankara* is a version of the name *Malayankara*. In fact, the word means the entire region of the Western Ghats (see above, note 2).
- 11 MS Vaticanus Syriacus 22 (online: https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.sir.22), the colophon is found at foll. 93r–94v. On fol. 93v–94r, the scribe writes: "This holy book was copied in the royal (or capital: *arsakāyā*), renowned and famous city of Šenglē (or, perhaps, Šenjli), which is in Malabar, in the land of India, in the holy church named after Mar Quriacos, the glorious martyr . . . when Mar Jacob, Metropolitan Bishop was the overseer and governor of the holy see of Saint Thomas the Apostle, that is to say governor of us and of all the holy Church of the Christian India." Šenglē/Šenjli corresponds to the *sinjli* (سنجلي), *šinkli* (شنكلي) and *sanjā* (سناجا) of the Arab geographers and to the Shingly of the early modern Cochin Jewish traditions of origin (on the mediaeval and early modern Shingly traditions, see Gamliel 2018a, here 64). Van der Ploeg reads the name as Shengala and identifies the city with Kodungallur (Van der Ploeg 1983, 3). Yet the word is clearly vocalised as Šenglē/Šenjli, while the identification, based on the early modern Paradeši ("foreigner": European immigrant) Jewish traditions, lacks sufficient foundation (see Gamliel 2018a).
- 12 The original text of this church/community history was written in Malayalam and is contained in MS Leiden Or. 1214. It was sent to Leiden, together with a Syriac translation, contained in MS Leiden Or. 1213, by the Nestorian metropolitan Mar Gabriel (in India from 1704 to 1730). The Syriac text with an earlier Latin translation was published by Samuel Giamil (*Brevis historia*, Giamil 1902: 552–64). The Malayalam original remains unpublished.
- 13 Marco Polo (tr Masefield 1908), III.17, 363–5.
- 14 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* V.10.3, and Jerome, Letter 70.4, and *De viris illustribus* 36.
- 15 Explanation given by Venugopala Panicker, communication to the author by Dr. Ophira Gamliel. According to this explanation, *māppilla* is a word composed of *māman*, 'maternal uncle', and *pillā*, 'child'. Gundert gives the following meanings: 'a bridegroom', 'son-in-law', and 'honorific title given to the colonists from the West' (Gundert 1872: 739).
- 16 It is a prescription of the slave-manumission ceremony that the newly liberated slave should be called the son/daughter of the former master.
- 17 I owe this interpretation to Ophira Gamliel. Goitein and Friedman do not doubt that Aśu could be a real slave-girl.
- 18 On the question of how much these exchanges can be considered real trade, see Rajan Gurukkal 2016.

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