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The Impact of the Portuguese on the Church in Kerala

A. Mathias Mundadan, CMI

Abstract: The encounter between the Christian West, represented by the Portuguese, and India was phenomenal. The Portuguese achieved the realization of their protracted hopes and dreams, not only in discovering India with its rich commercial resources but also in coming into contact with the Christians of India. The ‘discovery’ was the opening of a vast field for Christian expansion. It also marked the beginning of a new stage of existence for the Christians of India. They came to know more about the shape and form of the Christian world. The present article will concentrate more on the meeting of the ancient Christians of India, the St Thomas Christians, with the Portuguese and make a brief reference to the new Christian communities which sprang up on the Kerala coast as a result of Portuguese missionary enterprise.

Keywords: Colonialism, Church in Kerala, Colonial Mission, Portuguese influence

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A. Mathias Mundadan, CMI
Jeevass, Aluva

The encounter between the Christian West, represented by the Portuguese, and India was phenomenal. The Portuguese achieved the realization of their protracted hopes and dreams, not only in discovering India with its rich commercial resources but also in coming into contact with the Christians of India. The 'discovery' was the opening of a vast field for Christian expansion. It also marked the beginning of a new stage of existence for the Christians of India. They came to know more about the shape and form of the Christian world. The present article will concentrate more on the meeting of the ancient Christians of India, the St Thomas Christians, with the Portuguese and make a brief reference to the new Christian communities which sprang up on the Kerala coast as a result of Portuguese missionary enterprise.

1. The St Thomas Christians and the Portuguese

The story of the meeting between two Christian worlds, two ways of Christian life, of the St Thomas Christians of India and of the Portuguese from the West, is a romantic story of a sort. The Portuguese with their European Christian background believed in approaching in their own way the Christian community they discovered in In-

dia. They enthusiastically accepted the claim of the Indian Christians to apostolic origins. They even took pride in thinking thus: "If the Spaniards have St James as their Apostle we have St Thomas in our India".

Deeply rooted in the memories of St Thomas, and in the ties with the East-Syrian Church, and fully integrated into the socio-cultural milieu of Kerala, the St Thomas Christians had developed an identity of their own. With the coming of the Portuguese they were prepared for and initiated into a life in three worlds. The third world was that of the Latin or Western Christendom. This New World would in course of time exert so profound an influence on them (whether they wanted it or not), that it would become hard to shed its traces. The first representatives of this world were cordially and even enthusiastically welcomed; but soon they would pose a challenge to and even threaten the particular identity, autonomy and unity which the St Thomas Christians had developed through many centuries. The new world did not only distort the identity, but shattered the unity and destroyed the autonomy of the Indian Church of St Thomas. There would follow a very hard struggle to restore or rediscover these in a new way.

First Contacts: Cordial Relations

On 21 May, 1498, Vasco da Gama cast anchor in the harbour of Kozhikode. For the Europeans of the time, this exploit was the translation into reality of a long-cherished dream, the fruition of the sustained sea-faring efforts of a century. For the Christians of St Thomas in India it was sudden and unexpected, and the beginning of a new epoch of tremendous impact, the entering into a New World of existence. During the first twenty years or so it was more with Portuguese navigators and traders that the Indian Christians had come into contact. Only from the year 1516/7 did the influence of Portuguese missionaries appear to have had an impact on the life of the Christians of St Thomas.

During the whole of the sixteenth century these Christians continued to be ruled over by East Syrian bishops. The first half under Mar Jacob (1503-1552) was rather peaceful, though much of the initial enthusiasm and expectation soon died out. The second half under Mar Joseph (1558-69) and Mar Abraham (1569-97) witnessed a more tumultuous situation, but even this did not yet assume the proportions of the tense years of the seventeenth century which exploded into what is known as the Koonen Kurisu Satyam ('the Bent Cross Oath') of 1653, the rebellion of the St Thomas Christians against their Padroado archbishop, Francis Garcia.

Vasco da Gama, who came to India in 1498 on his first voyage, returned home, with the mistaken idea that he had met Christians at Kozhikode. It would appear that he and his men mis-

took the caste Hindus for Christians and their temples for Christian churches. Pedro Alvares Cabral followed da Gama in 1500 and met real Christians at Kochi and even took two of them to Portugal with him.

It is interesting that these lay persons had no difficulty to accept the idea of Christians living a life radically different from theirs. They did not hesitate to enter the temples of Hindus and undergo the rituals offered to them in those temples, all the time imagining that they were Christian churches. This would change when the missionary clergy with their theology arrived and began their activity in the field.

When Vasco da Gama arrived at Kochi (AD 1502) on his second voyage, a delegation of the St Thomas Christians went to meet him. They presented him a 'rod of justice' and swore allegiance to the Portuguese king and sought Portuguese protection. The admiral received them very kindly and promised all help and protection. The significance of this event is variously interpreted by historians. One thing is certain, that with this very cordial and intimate relations were established between the Indian Christians and newcomers. In the following year Afonso de Albuquerque's visit to Kollam further strengthened these relations¹.

The euphoria and enthusiasm did not continue for long. Tension gradually began to develop within the first two decades, and this increased greatly when contacts became more frequent between the Indian Christians and the missionaries who came in greater numbers as years passed.

Two Distinct Approaches

Underlining the tensions in the relations between the Indian Christians and the Portuguese during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (and later between them and the foreign Carmelite missionaries) was the respective ecclesial and theological consciousness. Very early in the sixteenth century a Portuguese priest, Alvaro Penteado, noted with regret:

As regards their national customs, their will is corrupted by their priests who say that just as there were twelve Apostles, even they founded twelve customs, each different from the others.²

Archbishop Ros who had spent many years among the St Thomas Christians, studied their customs and practices, and ruled over them as the first Padroado prelate, observed that the Christian held that the 'faith' of St Peter was different from that of St Thomas.³

Alexis de Meneses, Archbishop of Goa, had a synod celebrated at Diamper (Udayamperur) in 1599. His intention was to bring the Christians under Padroado jurisdiction and make them accept the Latin way of life and worship. One of the synodal decrees denounced this 'error' of the Christians:

There is one law of St Thomas and another of Peter; the Church founded by the one is distinct from the Church founded by the other...; those who belong to the law of Peter [the Latin Rite Portuguese] endeavoured to destroy the law of St Thomas.⁴

It is the consciousness of the St Thomas Christians of their individual

Church that is to be noted when they distinguished the 'law of Peter' from the 'law of Thomas'. It does not seem to have been their intention to oppose one to the other. Their mind worked more or less like this: each Christian community had its own customs and usage which marked their identity – these customs and usage probably were to be traced back to their foundation by the Apostles. Each community had to accept these customs as sacred, and no other community had the right to question them.

To this sound vision of an individual Church was added a typically Indian communal or caste attitude. It is to this attitude of communal exclusiveness Fr Penteado refers when he says:

The Christians of St Thomas do not care for communication with the Portuguese, not because they are not happy that they are Christians as we are, but because we are among them as the English and the Germans are among us.⁵

Another important point to be mentioned in this connection is the attitude of the Christians towards the Hindu community in Kerala and their relations with it. The 'Synod of Diamper' of 1599 forbade a number of customs and practices which the Portuguese considered 'pagan' (Hindu). These prohibitions and restrictions imposed by the synod were witness to the communal harmony and cordial relations that existed between Christians and the Hindus. This communal harmony and spirit of tolerance should be considered a typical Indian contribution to the Christian vision. The 'Synod of Diamper' mentions among others one

particular ‘error’ the St Thomas Christians are said to have held: “Each one can be saved in his own law, all laws are right”.⁶ The synod attributed this “error” to the contacts the St Thomas Christians maintained with their Hindu neighbours. It would be centuries before the Europeans would acquire a life-experience of other religions, before a theology of the religions of the world would emerge which would give due respect to the positive elements in those religions and their providential salvific role for millions of people. But the Indian Christians had been already living for centuries in a positive encounter with the high caste Hindus and had developed a theological vision of the Hindu religion which was more positive and liberal. Today in the light of modern theological approaches to other religions, one must admit that the vision of the Indian Christians was a more enlightened one than that of their European contemporaries.

Thus, at the arrival of the Portuguese in India towards the close of the fifteenth century the Christians of St Thomas were leading a life full of reminiscences of their past, and enjoying a privileged position in society and a measure of social and ecclesiastical autonomy. At the core of this life was an identity consciousness which, if not expressed in clear-cut formulas, was implicit in their traditions, their social, socio-religious⁷ and religious customs and practices, and their theological outlook. It is this particular mode of life which somehow or other came into conflict with the particular Christian vision and way of life of the Portuguese. The struggle began very early in the six-

teenth century, and all the troubles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are expressions of this conflict. Western Christendom for a long time looked upon the Eastern Christians as ‘heretics’ and ‘schismatics’. In spite of this, as soon as the Portuguese came into contact with the Christians of India, they showed great enthusiasm and willingness to enter into communion with the latter; yet the Portuguese *elite*, particularly the priests, cherished unhelpful ideas about their form of faith and practices. They considered that the form of Christianity existing in the East including that of the Indian Christians was an imperfect form for, according to them, the Western Latin form was the only perfect form. The relations of the Portuguese with the ancient Christians of India were governed by their ideas of Christian solidarity and also by a feeling of superiority as they regarded their culture and Christianity far superior to those of the Indian Christians. The Western form of Christianity, which was the Roman form of Christianity, was for them the perfect one not only in matters of faith and morals but in everything else that distinguished a Christian from a person of another faith. Hence, every Christian was expected to accept that form. The surest way to achieve this was to bring the Christians under the Portuguese jurisdiction and the Latin Rite. The Portuguese apparently had no clear idea of Eastern Christianity. The only thing they cared to know about Eastern Christianity was the imperfection of that Christianity and they probably attributed this imperfection to its divergence from Roman custom.⁷ This view of a particular indi-

vidual Church was quite contrary to the view which the Indian Christians had entertained, as explained earlier.

Missionary Vision of Other Religions

The Portuguese as a true Iberian of his time, was a typical medieval European Christian whose faith was strong, sometimes even verging on fanaticism and whose Christianity was militant. If this medieval spirit had undergone some mitigation elsewhere in Europe through the influence of more liberal ideas and especially the Renaissance Movement, the Iberian was practically untouched by any such liberal ideas. On the contrary, his age-long war with the forces of Islam – considered both a religious and a patriotic duty – only increased the fervour of his militant faith. As regards the ‘pagan’ world, the Portuguese had fully inherited the gloomy attitude of the Middle Ages towards it; it was a world wholly under the sway of the spirit of darkness and was to be conquered and converted.⁸

In India, however, where the Portuguese had to operate in territories under Hindu rulers, practical prudence called for the use of moderation. In Goa, which was the only Portuguese territory by conquest, the application of medieval ideas prevailed to some extent.

The conquering conception of the mission of the Church was uppermost in the minds of the Portuguese in general and the missionaries in particular, when they approached other religions. They saw the work of the mission and “evangelism in terms of military operations, lines of defence, plans for attack, as if ... waging war against other believers”.⁹ In many of the missionary re-

ports of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries this attitude is quite evident. The works of Sebastian Gonsalves, Diogo Gonsalves, Paulo da Trindade, and Francis de Sousa, are good examples. The many letters of Francis Xavier and even some of the polemic treatises of Robert de Nobili are no exception to this. Two mission histories are of special relevance here; one written by a Franciscan in the first half of the seventeenth century, and the other by a Jesuit in the beginning of the eighteenth century. The titles of these books themselves are highly suggestive of their contents and the spirit in which they were written. The Franciscan, Paulo da Trindade, described his account of the Franciscan missions in the East under the name, *Conquista Espiritual do Oriente* (‘The Spiritual Conquest of the East’). The Jesuit writer, Francis de Sousa, was most probably inspired by Trinidad’s title (perhaps such an inspiration was not needed: the times could suggest the title) when he called his history of the Jesuit missions in the East, *Oriente Conquistado a Jesu Christo* (‘The East Won over to Christ by the Fathers of the Society of Jesus’).¹⁰

Thus the approaches of the Portuguese and those of the Christians of St Thomas were very different and from almost opposite angles. The St Thomas Christians conscious of their history and their particular identity and autonomy wanted the communities to remain unimpaired in every respect, each independent of the other, but each extending full cooperation to the other for the good of both. To use a modern term they wanted co-existence and not absorption

of one community into the other. The Portuguese were unable to grasp this idea of co-existence. What they wanted was absorption, and that too of the local Christians into the Portuguese. To what extent they wanted this absorption is difficult to state precisely. They set no limit to it even going so far as to extend it to food, clothes and also names.

It is easy, therefore, to understand the conflicts in opinions and methods right from the beginning of the mission work of the Latin priests among the St Thomas Christians. In the end the stronger party (the Portuguese) would win temporarily (at the Synod of Diamper in 1599), but the solution thus brought about would lead to violence and the whole problem would become critical and lead to an explosion in its own time (the events from 1653). After this, a real and lasting solution would have to be sought partly in a going back to the old ways and partly in a new approach (from the end of nineteenth century onwards). We see seeds of this sown in the twenties, thirties and forties of the sixteenth century for the dramatic harvesting later.

Beginning of the Prolonged Conflict: First Half of the Sixteenth Century

The first note of open discord with the St Thomas Christians was struck by the rather imprudent activities of Fr Penteado, a Portuguese diocesan priest, who came to India on his own initiative and took up work among the St Thomas Christians some time in 1517, and this without leave from the authorities of those Christians. Mar Jacob's letter of 1524, which he wrote to the king of

Portugal, echoes the resentment of the Christians against Fr Penteado as well as some other causes of misunderstanding and misgiving on their part. It is at this time that a Dominican priest, John Caro by name, appeared in Malabar and offered to help Mar Jacob. His sympathetic approach did in fact make up for much of the harm done by Fr. Penteado. But the latter's interference for a second time caused a much more serious breach of peace; the good offices of the Franciscans somehow cleared the atmosphere though there emerged a small hard core who refused to have anything to do with the Portuguese.

In the last few years of Mar Jacob's ministry the Portuguese made a more radical and systematic attempt to latinize the Christians of St Thomas by establishing a seminary or college at Kodungalloor. The seminary was founded by a Franciscan friar, Vicente de Lagos, with a view to training the children of the St Thomas Christians towards priesthood. The friar was a good educationist and disciplinarian and the Portuguese writers have not spared words in praising his work. His only drawback was that he failed to understand and appreciate the specific pattern of the religious culture of the boys committed to his care and to have any regard for their maternal Rite. All those who came out of the seminary had been formed on Latin and western lines. They differed little from the Portuguese Latin missionaries. The St Thomas Christian parents, though at first enthusiastic about the good training their sons received at the seminary, later only felt sorry to find them being estranged from the way of life of the community. These

latinized priests were never assimilated into the community, but were kept out and treated just like the Latin priests.¹¹

Mar Jacob had by this time retired to the Franciscan monastery at Kochi and he died there around AD 1552.¹² The death of the old bishop had a special significance for the Portuguese in India: it marked the snapping of the last link which connected the Church of India with that of Persia. Mar Jacob was good, and meek, and to some extent had given in to the Portuguese. Still his presence was a symbol of the relation of the Church of India with the East-Syrian Church – a symbol of the whole ecclesiastical life of the St Thomas Christians. By the death of Mar Jacob that symbol was broken – so the Portuguese thought. With his death the last obstacle to their plans of latinizing the community was removed.

Before the death of Mar Jacob the Portuguese had generally recognized him as the bishop of the St Thomas Christians, although there were a few among them, like Friar Vicente de Lagos, who thought otherwise. After his death almost all the Portuguese took it for granted that the Christians were subject to the jurisdiction of Goa.

Second Half of the Sixteenth Century: Conflicts Intensified

But the Christians of St Thomas were determined to continue to maintain their relations with the Church of the East and secretly negotiated to get prelates from there to rule over them. Bishops did come in spite of all the vigilance of the Portuguese authorities and ruled the Church of India for yet another half century.

Mar Joseph and Portuguese Intolerance

After the death of Mar Jacob, Mar Abdisho, who succeeded Sulaqa as patriarch in Mesopotamia, sent to India two bishops, Mar Joseph and Mar Elias together with two Latin Rite Dominicans, Bishop Ambrose Buttigeg and Fr Antony Sahara, to take possession of the Indian Church. But the Portuguese authorities had already considered India as a Padroado territory and would not tolerate any clergyman entering India without the royal permit of Portugal. Therefore, when the mission of Mar Joseph and companions arrived in Goa in 1555 they were stopped there and prevented from proceeding to Malabar: the East-Syrian bishops were detained in a Franciscan friary at Bassein and the Dominicans were permitted to stay in their monastery in Goa. The guardian of the Bassein friary found the East-Syrian bishops to be fully orthodox and had only words of praise and admiration as regards their conduct and behaviour. Yet he would remind them that “the bishop of Goa was the bishop of Malabar and the whole of India”, and “those who administered the sacraments to the Christians of Malabar without the permission of the bishop of Goa, would be thieves who would enter the sheepfold not through the gate.”¹⁴ That meant that they had no right, from the Portuguese point of view, to govern the Church of the St Thomas Christians, whatever their credentials.

In 1557 all the four were set free and they proceeded to Malabar. It is not unlikely that such a course was decided upon by the Portuguese authorities because that was the only way they

thought they would get rid of Mar Abraham an, 'anonymous bishop' who was working in Malabar. The Jesuit Fr Dionysio wrote in 1578:

... while he [Mar Abraham] was governing, there came three bishops through Ormuz, namely bishop Ambrose, an Italian [actually Maltese] and Mar Joseph and Mar Elias, both Syrians. Between Mar Abraham and these three prelates there arose a dispute. The issue raised was whether Mar Abraham was legitimately instituted or not. Later he was deposed ¹⁵

There is no doubt that Mar Abraham was finally persuaded or forced to quit the country.

But Mar Joseph's presence in Kerala was not to the liking of the Portuguese authorities. He was soon accused of heresy and deported to Goa. The charge of heresy seems to have been only a ruse for getting rid of someone who caused embarrassment to the Portuguese authorities. For not only was Mar Joseph finally acquitted when he was subsequently taken to Lisbon, but we have as proof of his innocence a letter written at this time by the prior of the Dominican monastery in Goa, whose hospitality Mar Joseph had accepted before being taken to Lisbon. The prior, in the letter, speaks of him as a person deserving all honour and approbation. Mar Joseph was taken to Lisbon, which he probably reached at the latest by the beginning of 1564. As mentioned above, he was forthwith acquitted and through the influence of Antony Zahara he received an apostolic brief authorizing him to go back

to India and take care of his Christians. Some Jesuits who happened to travel with Mar Joseph in the same ship speak highly of his virtues, fatherliness, kindness and charity.

While Mar Joseph was away in Europe the Portuguese made a concerted attempt to bring the Christians of St Thomas under subjection to the Padroado bishop of Cochin, Dom Temudo. Perhaps the Christians might have succumbed to the pressure and persuasion in their despair at failing for sometime to get a prelate from Mesopotamia. But they would not give in easily; they sent a secret message to Patriarch Abdisho, who succeeded John Sulaqa asking for a bishop. It was, in all likelihood, in answer to this request that the patriarch sent Mar Abraham to India. He came to India in 1568 armed with not only letters of recommendation from Pope Pius IV and Patriarch Abdisho but also those of the Superiors General of the Dominicans, Franciscans and even the Jesuits. But they were of no avail in India. The Portuguese authorities were most unwilling to take the recommendation letters at their face value; and so Mar Abraham was detained. But the shrewd prelate managed to escape their vigilance, and travelling overland reached his Christians in Malabar by April 1569.

At this time Mar Joseph was not in Malabar, he had again gone to Europe. As suggested above, he might have reached India after his first journey to Europe some time in 1565. The shock and disappointment the Portuguese authorities of Kochi felt at his return are evident in the letters the ecclesiastics wrote on that occasion. Even the shadow of what they considered unorthodoxy was enough for

them to mount their attacks on the East-Syrian bishop. Soon accusations of heresy against him began to pour into Rome. It did not take them long to send Mar Joseph to Europe for the second time. Melchior Nuno Barreto S.J. wrote to his superior general to see to it that Joseph was not sent back again to Kerala.

This time the bishop was determined to proceed to Rome. On reaching Rome he pleaded his cause so well that he was acquitted by the Roman authorities. Unfortunately he could not return to India, as he died in Rome in the year 1569. Cardinal Tisserant has this entry in his book:

The Roman judges, however, like the Franciscan guardian of Bassein previously, felt obliged to give way before the piety of Mar Joseph, and to recognize his orthodoxy. Yet the measure of suffering was full, and Mar Joseph received near the tomb of the Apostles the crown which he had merited- through his long and slow martyrdom which was perhaps a more painful one than that of his heroic brother. Eighteen Syriac manuscripts, and one Arabic and one Persian manuscript, which he had always carried with him on his travels, were incorporated in the Apostolic Library of the Vatican by right of spoil.¹⁶

Mar Abraham: Discord and Reconciliation¹⁷

With the death of Mar Joseph, Mar Abraham's trials came to an end and now he was left alone in Malabar as the Metropolitan of All India. The bitter experiences he had undergone on previous occasions taught him to keep clear of the Portuguese circles of influence.

He chose Angamali as his residence, instead of Kodungallore which had by this time developed into a Portuguese stronghold. Mar Abraham refused to attend the second provincial council of Goa held in 1575, though he was formally invited to it by the archbishop of Goa.

Mar Abraham's relations with the Portuguese missionaries (now mainly Jesuits) frequently alternated between discord and reconciliation. The Jesuits had by this time been in Malabar for over 25 years, but their contacts with the St Thomas Christians had been so far sporadic and occasional. At this time a certain Mar Simeon from Mesopotamia, pretending to be a bishop sent by the Pope, had come to Malabar and had set up his camp at Kaduthuruthy. He had the following of a few churches and priests. Mar Abraham had tried his best to get this rival bishop out of Malabar but to no avail. The Jesuits offered the archbishop all their help to oust Mar Simeon. From Mar Abraham they obtained permission to establish themselves at Vaipicotta (Chennamangalam) and to go and preach and administer sacraments regularly in the churches of the St Thomas Christians. Mar Simeon was finally forced to leave India. The Jesuits, with the full approbation of Mar Abraham and his archdeacon, George of Christ, visited the Christians and succeeded in introducing many "reforms" such as priestly celibacy, confession before communion, burying the dead near the churches, some feasts of the Latin calendar and so on. Most of these "reforms" were merely Latin customs. A diocesan synod held at Angamali in

1583 was the finale of these reformatory attempts.

In that synod a decision was probably made to start a new seminary for the clerics of the St Thomas Christians. The Jesuits thought that such a seminary under their auspices would bring to full fruition the 'reforming' activities already begun by the approval of the synod. The seminary began to function at Vaipicotta probably in 1584 with the full approval of the archbishop and his archdeacon. Soon it became a centre of ecclesiastical learning, to which students flocked from all over Malabar. Even priests were desirous of going to the seminary to profit by the course of Moral Theology and *casus conscientiae* conducted there. Knowing from experience how ineffective the seminary at Kodungallore had turned out to be to minister to the needs of the St Thomas Christians, care was taken at Vaipicotta to teach Syriac along with Latin, although this policy suffered reverses later on. Courses in Malayalam were given to foreign Jesuits, and in Syriac, Latin and Portuguese to local seminarians.

However, it was not very long before trouble began to develop. The Jesuits were not unanimous about the policy they had to adopt with regard to the St Thomas Christians. While one group wanted total and quick reduction of these Christians to the Latin rite and the Portuguese jurisdiction, another group wished to do it tactfully through a slow process without offending the feelings, retaining even the Syriac language for liturgical purposes. There were others who counselled that their

rite be kept intact, and their subjection to the Catholic patriarch of the East-Syrians be not disturbed. At the same time they would insist that the Latin Jesuits should have a decisive role in educating them and disciplining them. In that way, they hoped, they would be able to purge them of what they thought were abuses and errors.

Even the mildest of their attitudes was provocative in the eyes of the archbishop, his archdeacon and the people. The events which followed only helped the situation to get worse. In 1585 there took place the third provincial council of Goa. Mar Abraham was invited and he attended it as the Pope had desired. The third session of the council enacted ten decrees concerning the Church of Malabar. The main ones dealt with the training of the students in the seminary at Vaipicotta, the translation of the Sacramentary from Latin into Syriac for use in the churches of Malabar, the entry into Malabar of a few East-Syrian bishops who were obliged to show their letters patent to the archbishop of Goa before proceeding to Malabar, and so on. Francis Ros, a Catalan (Spanish) Jesuit, who had arrived in India in 1584, and who accompanied Mar Abraham to Goa for the Council, was commissioned to implement the decisions taken in the council, particularly to help Mar Abraham in the work of translating and correcting Syriac books.

While it is true that Mar Abraham affixed his signature to the decrees of the council, this was only under duress. A number of the provisions of the decrees were not to his liking. According to a letter of Fr Valignano S.J., dated

Goa, 17 December, 1585, Mar Abraham was threatened and bullied at the council. It is no wonder that after his return to Kerala he showed little enthusiasm to carry out the decrees of the council relating to the Church of the St Thomas Christians. His relations with the missionaries began to grow more and more strained.

Presumably Mar Abraham's rift with the Jesuits began to widen once Ros progressed in his work of correcting the books. In any case soon news began to reach Rome that Mar Abraham had decidedly heretical tendencies. In the meantime, quite anxious to preserve the identity and autonomy of the Church of St Thomas in India, Mar Abraham tried to provide for his succession. Already in the 80's he had sought the help of the Jesuits and the king of Kochi to get his archdeacon, George of Christ, consecrated coadjutor. He did not succeed in doing this because the archdeacon, it is said, out of humility declined the nomination. George of Christ died in 1593 without receiving Episcopal consecration. Now Mar Abraham sought the help of the Jesuits again to plead the case of archdeacon George of the Cross who succeeded George of Christ. But he never received any reply from the Pope, or the king of Portugal or even from the Jesuit general to all of whom he had written with the request that provision be made for his archdeacon to succeed him.

On his death-bed Mar Abraham solicited the concurrence of the Jesuits to appoint the archdeacon his successor in virtue of the faculties he had received from the East-Syrian patriarch.

They refused to oblige him, either because the position was not quite clear to them, or because they were already committed to the idea that a Latin bishop should succeed him in order to facilitate the complete subjection of the St Thomas Christians to the Padroado jurisdiction. This attitude of the Jesuits pained the metropolitan; this, in all likelihood, made him defy the attempts of the Jesuit fathers to administer to him the last sacraments according to the Latin Rite. The Jesuit letters about his death refer to this defiant attitude towards them. He breathed his last in early January, 1597.

'Synod of Diamper'

The 'Synod of Diamper' ratified and consolidated the latinizing and westernizing efforts of the Portuguese which had begun quite early in the sixteenth century.¹⁸ Even a superficial glance at the acts and decrees of the synod would suffice to convince one how radical a change in the life-pattern of the Christians it envisaged. "Many people nowadays are shocked by the tendency to reduce everything to the standard of Roman and Portuguese customs. Was not this tendency the leading principle of Archbishop de Meneses and his collaborators?" asks Card. Tisserant. The Cardinal, after delineating the various changes decreed by the synod, says:

Alexis de Meneses, born and brought up in the atmosphere of the Counter-Reformation in Europe, was not the man however to yield even an inch when he thought something to be his duty.¹⁹

Some of the decrees insist that there was to be only one law, that of

Christ; there were not to be two different laws, one of St Thomas and the other of St Peter, as some apparently thought. The obvious purpose was to inculcate in the Christians of St Thomas the idea that they should sever all ties with the East-Syrian patriarch and accept only bishops appointed by Rome. C.de Clerq remarks:

All the causes of the subsequent dissension... are provoked by Meneses' excessive reform and also by doing away with the hierarchy of the rite.²⁰

Meneses sought to destroy at one blow what he considered the root-cause of all the shortcomings that he found in the Church of Malabar. By means of threats, bribes and force he succeeded in severing the long-standing connection of the Malabar Church with the patriarchate of Persia, even though the patriarch in question (Simon Denha) was fully in communion with Rome. The next step was to entrust that Church to a Latin prelate and to bring it under the patronage of the Portuguese crown. Several of the ceremonies and rites in the celebration of holy mass and the administration of the sacraments were hastily and unnecessarily changed in order to bring them more in line with Latin usage. All this invariably provoked a good deal of discontent. In several of the decrees the ground was cleared for the radical substitution of most of the East-Syrian and Indian customs and disciplinary laws, which were prevalent in India, with the Western disciplinary laws especially those of the Council of Trent. This produced an unhappy admixture of Latin customs and Eastern customs, and the identity of the

Indian Church became blurred for a long time.

Perhaps the most radical action taken to sever the Church of India from the East Syrian Church was the prescription of the 14th Decree which condemned by name literary works which were branded as dangerous, and were subjected to the *auto-da-fe* programme that continued even after the synod was over.

The synod concluded on 26th June. All the rectors of the churches were enjoined to keep in their archives at least one copy of the Malayalam translation of the acts of the synod. This translation was to be the official one, signed by Archdeacon George and by the superior of the college of Vaipicotta. In order that all the faithful might be taught the prescriptions of the synod, its acts were to be read by sections whenever there was no sermon at the services on Sundays and feast days. Two authentic copies, signed by the archbishop, were to be kept, the first at Vaipicotta, the second one at Angamali. Most of these instructions were put into practice under the supervision of Archbishop Menses himself during his post-synodal visitation from July to November of the same year.

*Jesuit Bishops Under the Padroado*²¹

There can be no doubt about the fact that the tone of the seventeenth century was set by the 'Synod of Diamper', which in practice was the denial of the age-old characteristic pattern of the life of the Christians of St Thomas. The initial calm was belied by the ensuing violent reactions. On the surface everything

seemed to have been set in good order but at bottom there lurked dissatisfaction and resentment, which manifested themselves not in one single violent eruption, but in a series of events apparently insignificant by themselves. The synod had arbitrarily severed all the ties of the Indian Church with the East-Syrian patriarch. Bishops under the Padroado jurisdiction were appointed to rule the St Thomas Christians. The first choice was Francis Ros who ruled them from 1600 to 1624. The other two who followed him were also Jesuits: Stephen Britto (1624-41) and Francis Garcia (1641-1659). The residence of the metropolitan was Angamali during the reign of Mar Abraham. Ros made Kodungalloor again his residence. The respective archdeacons who assisted these prelates were: George of the Cross (d.1637) and Thomas Parampil (Thomas de Campo) who rebelled against Garcia in 1653 and later became Thomas I, 'bishop' of those who broke communion with Rome.

Both under Ros and Britto the story of the second half of the sixteenth century seemed to be repeated in the person of the archdeacons – quarrels and reconciliation with the Portuguese prelates alternate. The difference was in the fact that now the Portuguese Jesuits were the superiors and the archdeacons subordinates. This made the situation even more unbearable. The community witnessed helplessly some of the high-handed actions of the archbishops, who probably did everything with the best of intentions. One such occasion was when Ros denied the archdeacon many of his pristine privileges and rights and even dared to replace him

with a foreign Jesuit. Things came to a head under Archbishop Garcia. The arrival of an Eastern bishop, Atallah, provided the occasion for the final outbreak.

*The Revolt of 1553: Reaction to Latinization*²²

It seems now an established fact that Atallah who came to India in the middle of the seventeenth century originally hailed from the Jacobite Church of Syria; later he was converted to Catholicism. He came to India at the request of the Coptic patriarch while he was staying in Cairo. He seems to have remained faithful to the Catholic allegiance till his death.

But in India the St Thomas Christians (except perhaps for a leader or two among them) regarded him as a patriarch or metropolitan sent from the East-Syrian Church with the approbation of the Pope of Rome. The Portuguese thought that he was a 'Nestorian' or East-Syrian intruder. The rift that his presence and his forced removal from India caused in the community, is to be understood in the light of the attachment the Indian Christians still cherished for the East-Syrian Church. That the St Thomas Christian always remained very attached to the bishops of their own rite and merely tolerated the government of the Latin bishops, is clear from the many petitions they wrote from time to time to the various authorities, in which they pleaded for Syrian bishops. Garcia himself noted this with utter disappointment. Filled with gloom, he wrote in the last month of 1652:

It is astonishing to see how attached these *Cattanars* [St Thomas Christian

priests] and Christians are to the bishops from Babylon. Some young men who went on a pilgrimage to the tomb of St Thomas, in spite of the fact that they are at present studying in the College of Vaipicotta and also treated with so much tenderness by the Jesuit Fathers, no sooner they see this schismatic [Ataliah] at the tomb of St Thomas, than they run back post-haste to announce the news to the Archdeacon, narrating also the many 'miracles' performed by the schismatic.²³

It seems most likely that it was during the years 1648 and 1649 that Archdeacon Thomas Parampil took the final step of writing secretly to the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria, to the Jacobite patriarch of Antioch and the Nestorian patriarch of Babylon, giving exaggerated reports of the state of abandonment in which the St Thomas Christians found themselves because of the alleged absence of a bishop, and asking them to be so kind as to remedy the situation. In the previous year (1647) he had sent his complaints and petitions to Rome through the good offices of certain Carmelite priests. On the same occasion and also two years later he appointed these same priests his procurators in Rome, Lisbon and Goa. In spite of all this, it would seem that he did not have much hope of any prompt action on the part of Rome. Past experience showed him that his adversaries were far too powerful for him in Rome and still more in Portugal. It must have been this feeling that there was no way out of the situation, that drove the archdeacon to write secretly to the Eastern patriarchs who were not in communion with Rome.

When the letter of the archdeacon reached the Coptic patriarch, in all likelihood Atallah was in Cairo where he was waiting for some letters of appointment from Rome. He was once the metropolitan of Damascus of which see he was dispossessed by the intrigues of his rivals. After that he had charge of the Jacobites in Persia, who at his instigation, had given allegiance to Rome. In Cairo he was expecting to receive appointment as administrator to these Syrian Catholics in Persia. He was there at least from 1646. In Cairo it was well-known that he wished to have a Church to govern. So when the letter of the archdeacon reached the Alexandrian patriarch, the patriarch invited Attallah to proceed to Malabar to help the Christians there.

Atallah accepted the invitation and set out for India at once. He landed in Surat in March 1652 and in August of the same year he reached Mylapore. There he was able to meet and talk to three seminarians and a layman from Kerala, who had gone to Mylapore on a pilgrimage in July of the same year. It is through them that he managed to send a letter to the archdeacon. In the letter he declared himself to be "Ignatius, Patriarch of the Whole of India and China", who had received all powers from the Pope.

Before the archdeacon and his Christians could do anything Atallah was shipped to Goa. When they came to know that he had arrived at Kochi on his way to Goa, they went to meet him. Permission to see the prelate was denied them and a rumour soon spread that he was drowned in the sea. Tempers

rose and the Christians assembled in or before a shrine or near an open-air cross (the "Coonen Cross") and took the oath that they would never obey Archbishop Garcia. Some months later a few leading priests met at Alangad and twelve of them placed their hands on Archdeacon Thomas and made him a 'bishop' - all this they did in accordance with the instructions, so they pretended, they had received from Mar Atallah. The dream of the Christians, aroused by the arrival of Atallah, to be once more an autonomous Church under a Syrian prelate was shattered. The oath and the tragic events that followed were expressions of their bitter disappointment.

The 'Coonen Cross Oath' marked the final outbreak of the storm that had been gathering on the horizon for over a century. It was a revolt against the Latin rule. The trauma was felt even more keenly when the community became fully conscious of the sad fact that their Church was no longer one. The revolt of 1653 split the community vertically into two groups, one in communion with Rome and the other establishing a new allegiance, namely, to the Jacobite Church of Antioch. From now on the struggle of the community would be to regain its original identity, autonomy and unity. All the three aspects were very closely interrelated and the struggle for one was the struggle simultaneously for the other two.

2. New Christian Communities

The Portuguese missionary enterprise in India that started in the early sixteenth century continued rather vigorously into the seventeenth. It reaped

a rich harvest. It must be said to its credit that new Latin rite communities sprang up in a number of places along the coastal region of Kerala. Thus two parallel Christian communities began to exist in Kerala from the sixteenth century onwards, one of the ancient St Thomas Christians following an Oriental rite, and the other of the new Christians following the Latin rite. The ultimate responsibility for the creation of these parallel communities and its adverse consequences, if any, rests with the western missionaries. However, the reluctance of the ancient Christians to break open and come out of their aristocratic shell might have also contributed to the situation.

The Portuguese authorities, especially Afonso de Albuquerque, greatly encouraged interracial marriages, marriages between Portuguese men and Indian women. This gave rise to a distinct group of Portuguese Indian Christians, who, in course of time, assumed different names, one being *Munnuttikar* ('Group of Three Hundred'). Direct converts came from different castes and classes of Hindu population: a few were perhaps brahmins; a greater number were nayars (panikkars and ordinary militia men); the vast majority belonged to what were called the lower classes (today's dalits), such as ezhavas, mucuvas, etc.

At least in the Kochi area the converts from 'low castes/classes and upper castes/classes' seem to have blended so well that the differences of caste or class disappeared from among the Christians. They formed one community which came to be known as

Ezhumuttikar ('Group of Seven Hundred'). The Portuguese started a school in 1512 in Kochi (the first of its kind in the East). Afonso de Albuquerque, its founder, wrote to the Portuguese king in the same year:

There would be about hundred boys in the school, among whom there are children of the panikkars and other nobles. They are very clever and 'quickly pick up what is taught to them; all are Christian boys.²⁴

The boys attending it came from all classes; boys belonging to the 'high castes' mingled with those coming from the 'low castes'. This was something of a revolution in the caste-ridden society of the day. The message this pioneer institution conveyed could not but impress the people.

But caste feelings and distinctions would soon find their way into the new Christian communities. Possibly it was the conversion later to Christianity of a large number of fishermen south of Kochi which introduced such distinctions among the Latin Rite Christians in Kerala. These converts formed the *Anjuttikar* ('Group of Five Hundred'), a group distinct from the *Ezhumuttikar*. The formation of the Alappuzha diocese separate from that of Kochi gave consideration to these groupings.

3. Conclusion

The meeting of the Christian West with the people of India was an epoch-making event. The Portuguese achieved the realization of their protracted hopes and dreams, not only in 'discovering' India with its rich commercial resources, but in coming into contact with the

Christians of India, and in giving a new spurt to Christian expansion in this land of religions and ancient wisdom.

By the arrival of the powerful Portuguese Christians the community of Indian Christians, the St Thomas Christians, stood to gain greatly. One of the important gains was that they were brought into direct contact with Western Christianity, a contact which would have immensely helped the growth of the community if the parties concerned had viewed this in the correct perspective. Had the Portuguese cared a little more to study the Eastern Christian and Indian mentality and approach, they would have avoided most of the negative results.

Instead of exaggerating the abuses, the 'errors', the 'schisms'/'heresies', and the 'pagan' ways, if only they had the courage and good sense to tell the Indian Christians what the Jesuit Melchior Carneiro and his friends told them in the mid-sixteenth century namely, "Both you and we hold to the same faith, the difference of customs matters little;" if they had consistently followed such a policy and left the Indian Christians to their own life; if they had encouraged them to be more evangelistic and apostolic; if they had built their missionary expansion with the Indian Christian way of life as a basis, the history of the Church in India would have been far different.

It should, however, in all fairness be admitted that the modern evangelistic outlook of the Catholic Eastern Christians in India owes much to the Western missionaries, beginning with the Portuguese. The Portuguese who were not affected by caste prejudices

helped the emergence of Christian communities which renounced caste, as we have seen in the case of Christians in Kochi area. This open attitude of the Portuguese exerted some positive influence on the St Thomas Christians to come out of their 'aristocratic' shell and progressively ignore caste and class prejudice. We know that at least from the second half of the sixteenth century, persons belonging to the so-called 'low castes' were converted to Christianity and at least partially assimilated into the St Thomas Christian community. The 'Synod of Diamper' decreed that all efforts should be made to baptize those people who were quite willing to join the main stream Christianity and were properly disposed (cf. Session V, Decree 36). However, in consideration of the special socio-political conditions prevailing in Kerala at that time, the 'Synod' took a rather tolerant policy (cf. Session IX, Decree 2). Hence full integration of the communities was not effected. Even today the caste prejudices and 'aristocratic' pretence of the St Thomas Christians comes in the way of the desired integration. Inter-marriages between St Thomas Christians and the Latin Rite Christians are rare, though a slow change is visible. The 'exclusivism' of the Southist group of the St Thomas Christians has become scandalous. Even among Protestants (especially the CSI) a tension persists between the 'Syrian' (St Thomas Christian) elements and the 'new converts' from the dalits. The long association with Western Christianity has not succeeded in completely eliminating this unhealthy attitude and prejudices of the St Thomas Christians. There is some truth in what Felix Wilfred says:

Their [St Thomas Christians'] easy accommodation to the caste-system did not permit the emergence of any prophetic, Christian thought or critique and challenge to the unequal society of their times.²⁵

The new spurt in Christian expansion in Kerala was definitely due to Portuguese initiative, though we cannot subscribe to all the methods used by them for conversion and the aggressive polemic and westernizing ideology which was an integral part of their evangelical action. They laid a firm foundation for the growth of Latin Christianity in Kerala. The drawbacks were many. The most glaring of these drawbacks was the quasi-identification of Christianity with Westernizing; many of the converts were asked to adopt not only Portuguese ('Christian') proper names but even Portuguese surnames; even the western way of dressing was considered part of conversion! The segregating of converts from their fellow Keralites and the over-protection extended to them were tantamount to uprooting them from their natural and congenial socio-cultural milieu. All this paved the way for a Christianity in "western garb" which probably came in the way of many well-placed Hindus becoming Christians. There are, however, some very positive aspects for which we should be thankful to the Portuguese. One is the encouragement given to inter-racial marriages and the disregard shown for caste distinction. Most striking of all are the charitable and educational activities which witnessed effectively to the core message of Christianity – the message of universal love and fellowship.

Notes

1. Cf. Mundadan, *Arrival of the Portuguese in India and the Thomas Christians under Mar Jacob, 1498-1552*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1967, pp.59-67, 74-78.
2. Antonio da Silva-Rego, ed., *Docucumentacao para a Historia das Missoes do Padroado Portugues do Oriente, India*. Lisbon: Agencia geral das Colonias, Vol.III, 1950, p.550.
3. This is found in Francis Ros S.J., *De Erroribus Nestorianorum qui in hac India Orientali Versantur* (A dissertation written by Ros on the doctrinal position of St Thomas Christians at the close of the 16th century), ed. by I.Hausher S.J., *Orientalia Christiana*, XI,I,No.40, Rome: Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies, 1928.
4. Act II, Decree 7, *Synodo Diocesano da Igreja e Bispado de Angamale...*, Coimbra: Officina de Diogo Gomez... 1606, p. 10f.
5. Antonio da Silva Rego, *op.cit.*, p. 550
6. Act III, Decree 4, *Synodo Diocesano...* *op.cit.*, f.9v; cf. also f.9.
7. Cf. A.M.Mundadan, *Sixteenth Century Traditions of St Thomas Christians*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1970, p.157.
8. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 154.
9. Murray Rogers, "Hindu and Christian – A Moment Breaks", *Religion and Society*, 12(1965)37.
10. Paulo da Trindade, OFM, *Conquista Espiritual do Oriente*, ed. by Felix Lopes, OFM, 3 vols, Lisbon: 1962-67; Francisco de Sousa, *Oriente Conquistado a Jesu Christo...*, Lisbon: Officina de Valentin de Costa Deslandes, 1710, new ed. by M. Lopes de Almeida, Porto: Pello e Irmao-Editores, 1978.
11. Cf. Mundadan, *The Arrival*, pp.82-116, 125-42.
12. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 142-48
13. This summary is based on the following books: Jonas Thaliath T.O.C.D. (C.M.I.), *The Synod of Diamper*, Rome: Pont.Institute of Or.Studies, 1958; D. Ferrolí S.J., *The Jesuits in Malabar*, Vol.I, Bangalore: Bangalore Press, 1939; G. Beltrami, *La Chiesa Caldea nel Secolo dell'Unione*, (*Orientalia Christiana* 29), Rome: Pont.Inst.for Or.Studies, 1933; Joseph Thekkedath S.D.B., *History of Christianity in India*, Vol.II, Bangalore: CHAI, 1982, pp.37-47; cf. also A.M. Mundadan C.M.I., "The Eastern Church 16th-17th Centuries", in H.C. Perumalil C.M.I. and E.R. Hambye S.J, eds, *Christianity in India*, Alleppey: Prakasham Publications, (1972), pp.89-93.
14. Cf. Antonio da Silva-Rego, *op.cit.*, Vol.IX (1953), pp.298-302; Joseph Wicki, *op.cit.*, Vol.VI (1960), pp.178-80, 413, 427f.
15. Silva-Rego, *op.cit.*, Vol. XII (1958), p.398f.
16. Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity in India*, p. 41
17. Cf. the same books in footnote 14 above; Cf. also A.M. Mundadan, *art. cit.*, pp.93, 96; Cyriac Thevarmannil, "Mar Abraham the Archbishop of the St Thomas Christians in Malabar (1508-1597)" (1965); Joseph Thekkedath, *op.cit.*, pp.47-63.
18. The main study on the 'Synod' is by Jonas Thaliath, *The Synod of Diamper*, *op.cit.* There is an earlier study: G. M.Antao, *De Synodi Diamperitanae Natura atque Decretis* (1952), Cf.also J.Thekkedath, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol.II, *op. cit.*, pp.66-75.¹
19. Tisserant, *op. cit.* , p. 60.
20. Quoted *ibid.*, p.65, footnote 2.

21. Cf. Thekkedath, *op.cit.*, pp.75-90; D. Ferroli, *Jesuits in Malabar*, 2 vols., Bangalore: Bangalore Press, 1939 and 1951; George Vithayathil, "Stephen de Britto, Archbishop of the St Thomas Christians in Malabar" (Doctoral Dissertation, 1971); J. Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All India*, Rome: Pontifical Institute of Or. Studies, 1972; also books and articles mentioned in the next footnote.
22. Joseph Thekkedathu (Thekkedath) S.D.B., *The Troubled Days of Francis Garcia S.J., 1641-59* is the most important study on the revolt. Cf. also K.P. Werth, *Das Schisma der Thomas-Christen unter Erzbischof Franciscus Garzia*, Limburg:1937; E.R.Hambye, S.J., "An Eastern Prelate in India, Mar Athallah, 1652-53", ICHR, Vol. 2/1 (1968), pp. 1-5; J. Thekkedath, *History of Christianity in India, op. cit.*, Vol.II, pp. 91-109.
23. Quoted in J.Thekkedathu, *Troubled Days*, p. 65.
24. Silva-Rego, *op. cit.*, Vol.1 (1947), p. 149.
25. Felix Wilfred, *Beyond Settled Foundations*, Madras: Department of Christian Studies, Madras University, 1993, p. 8.