

INDIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Our Church

Malankara Orthodox Church is an ancient Church of India and it traces its origin to as far back as A. D. 52 when St. Thomas one of the Disciples of Jesus Christ came to India and established Christianity in the South Western parts of the sub-continent.

The St. Thomas Christians or the Syrian Christians exist at present in different churches and denominations. But a major section of the parent body of St. Thomas Christians which has maintained its independent nature constitute the Orthodox Church under the Catholicate of the East with Headquarters at Devalokam, Kottayam.

THE BEGINING OF THE CHURCH

That the Apostle Thomas one of the twelve is the founder of the St. Thomas Christians has been well established. Christian writers and representatives of the Churches at least from the 4th century refer to the evangelistic labours of the Apostle Thomas in India and the Indian Christians ascribe the origin of their Church to this event in the first century.

It is reasonable to believe that the Apostle came to India, preached the gospel, established the Church and died here as a Martyr. Tradition has it that the Apostle Thomas established Churches in Kerala and appointed Priests for them.

THE PERSIAN CONNECION

The Indian Church came in contact with the East Syrian Church possibly from the 4th century. In the 5th century, the church of Persia came to its own. The Catholicos with his seat at Seleucia -Ctesiphon began to be called also Patriarch and in 486 A. D. the Church officially accepted a resolution in its Synod to recognise Nestorius as a Saint and Church Father. This decision was not however accepted by a minority of Persian Christians who acknowledged a Catholicos at Tagrit in northern Mesopotamia as their spiritual head in 629 A. D.

We have evidence that in the 8th century the Indian Church had its Primate known as "The Metropolitan and the Gate of All India" a title adopted presumably under Islamic influence. The Vatican Codex 22, written in Cranganore in 1301 gives the titles as "The Metropolitan of the Throne of St. Thomas and of the whole Church of the Christians in India."

The Indian Church maintained its autonomous administration. The Church of Persia had a tradition which acknowledged autonomy of Churches in its communion abroad. The Church in Kerala continued as an administratively independent community till the 16th century.

THE PORTUGUESE PERIOD

Things changed during the Portuguese period. The missionaries who came from abroad were eager to bring the Indian Church into communion with Rome. They worked on it almost through the 16th century. In 1599 by the Synod of Diamper, the assembly of representatives from churches was forced to give up the Indian Church's connection with the Patriarch of the Persian Church in favour of the Pope of Rome. But there was dissatisfaction among the people. This dissatisfaction led to a general revolt in 1653 known commonly as the Coonan Cross revolt. Portuguese efforts to put it down by force did not succeed. Now Rome entered the field directly through Missionaries, and a section of those who rebelled went back to Roman allegiance.

A body of the people led by the Archdeacon, who stood for the administrative autonomy of the Indian Church inspite of serious difficulties were determined to keep to the independence of the Indian Church. The Portuguese were in fact instrumental in causing a division in the one united church in India. Although they succeeded in getting the allegiance of a party in the Church to the Roman Catholic community, an equally important party did not follow their way.

THE ANTIOCHENE CONNECTION

The party that sought to preserve the Church's freedom appealed to several Eastern Christian Centres for help in restoring its episcopal succession. The Antiochene Syrian Patriarch responded and sent to India a Bishop, Metropolitan Mar Gregorios of Jerusalem who came to India in 1665. The Archdeacon who had been declared in the meantime to be Metropolitan MarThoma by the laying on of hands by twelve Presbyters was now confirmed by him in his episcopal rank, and both of them worked together to organisethe church on firm footing. Mar Thoma I was followed in succession by a series of Prelates with the same name till 1816 when the last of them namely Mar Thoma IX came to the scene, but was soon replaced by Mar Dionysius II.

Malankara Orthodox Church had felt the need of assistance for establishing systematic education for its clergy, teaching the people in the faith, instructing the clergy in properly celebrating the liturgical services and above all assistance in the maintenance of the episcopal succession intact. But the Orthodox Church maintained its autonomous administration and life under local leadership. Even the help from the Antiochene Syrian Patriarch was without any idea of formally submitting to his jurisdiction, but only for an over all spiritual supervision and of keeping to a friendly relation.

There were differences of opinion over the authority of the Patriarch in the Malankara Church and it created certain difficulties. But the Church has always been successful in maintaining its freedom and never allowed any foreign domination.

CO-OPERATION WITH THE C.M.S

By 1795 the British established themselves in South India and Kerala came under their sway. During the time of Col. Munroe who was the British Resident in Kerala, P'ulikottillitoo Ramban expressed his interest in founding a Seminary for the teaching of the Church's Clergy. The Resident supported him and the seminary was founded in 1815. Pulikottil Ittoop Ramban became a Bishop -Metropolitan Mar Dionysius II.

From 1816 the experiment of co-operation between the Malankara Church and the C. M. S. of the Anglican Church was carried on, but it was found to be unsuccessful and was called off in 1836.

This incident led to the division of the community into three bodies. One of them a reformed group tried to bring about serious reforms in the liturgy and practices of the Church as a whole but failed. After about half a century of conflict within the church this body had to withdraw and organise itself as the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. A smaller body of the Syrian Christians opted to join with the missionaries and be absorbed in the Anglican Church. The majority of the community continued in the Church without accepting the reforms.

AUTHORITY OF THE PATRIARCH OF ANTIOCH

The conflict between the body which adopted the reform and that which opposed it, was a serious development in the church during the 19th century. This led to the latter to appeal for help from the Antiochene Syrian Patriarch. In 1875 Patriarch Peter III came to Kerala and held a Synod of representatives of Churches .at Mulanthuruthy in 1876. This Synod adopted a number of resolutions including an admission that the Church would continue in the communion of the Patriarch and the Syrian Church of Antioch. However the Patriarch tried to see in these decisions more than the Indian Church really wanted to acknowledge.

Following the Synod of Mulanthuruthy in 1876 a litigation in court between the party in favour of the reforms and the party against it continued. It came to an end in 1889 with the judgement announced in favour of the latter by the then highest court of Kerala, the Royal Court of Appeal. The majority in a panel of three judges gave their verdict admitting that from the middle of the 18th century an over- all spiritual supervision used to be-exercised by the Patriarch over the Malankara Church and that he had a right to claim it.

Patriarch Peter III was not satisfied with this judgement. He was keen to establish that he had full authority over the Malankara Church both in its spiritual and in its temporal matters and not merely an over all spiritual supervision. In fact he protested though nobody responsible in the matter took note of it. His second successor Patriarch Mar Abdullah II was determined to follow up the matter. With this intention he came to Kerala in 1909 and pressed the issue. But that led to a sad division in the Church from 1911, one party siding with the Patriarch and the other lining up with Metropolitan Mar Dionysius VI of Vattasseril who stood against him and wanted to keep up the independence of Malankara Church.

CATHOLICATE ESTABLISHED IN MALANKARA IN 1912

In this conflict the Metropolitan could obtain the support of Patriarch Mar Abdul Messiah the immediate successor to Patriarch Peter III. Patriarch Peter III was succeeded in 1895 by Mar Abdul Messiah. By state interference he had lost his position in Turkey and came to be replaced by Mar Abdulla. While Metropolitan Mar Dionysius VI clashed with Mar Abdullah, the Canonical senior Patriarch Abdul Messiah offered to come to the assistance of the former. Thus in 1912 he came to Kerala and associated with Mar Dionysius VI and the Bishops and the Church with him, to establish the Catholicate of the East in Malankara. The ceremony was held at St. Mary's Church, Niranam on 15 September 1912; Niranam Church is one of the seven Churches founded by St. Thomas during his visit here in the first century.

The Catholicate of the East was thus established in Malankara, with the co-operation of the canonical Patriarch Abdul Messiah, who was senior to Mar Abdulla. Thereby the Patriarch himself has withdrawn his right of spiritual oversight if any in the Indian Church, which the Royal Court of Appeal had acknowledged for him in 1889.

The designation "Catholicos of the East" to the successors of St. Thomas the Apostle was given by the Jerusalem Synod of AD 231. The head quarters of the Orthodox Church of the East was first at Uraha (Edessa) in Persia. This was moved to 'Selucia' and it was there the title "Catholicos of the East" originated. Catholicos is an ecclesiastical dignitary recognised in the Antiochen Syrian Church also. He is equal in rank with the Patriarch though the latter is considered as first among equals (primus inter pares)

CONSTITUTION OF THE CHURCH ADOPTED IN 1934

Malankara Orthodox Church is now administered as per the constitution adopted in 1934 which was passed by the Malankara Syrian Christian Association. The Association is a fully representative body of the church with elected members -priests and laymen -from all the Parish Churches. Now one priest each and laymen 1 to 10 depending on the number of members in each parish are members of the Association. There are about 1400 parishes under the Malankara Orthodox Church. It is the Association which elects the Catholicos and the Malankara Metropolitan and also the Bishops.

There is a Managing Committee for the Association with members from each Diocese elected by the Association. The Malankara Metropolitan is the President of the Managing Committee and the remaining Prelates having administrative charge are the Vice-Presidents.

The Association Managing Committee has a Working Committee with Malankara Metropolitan as the President. The Working Committee is also the Consultative Committee of the Malankara Metropolitan.

The Episcopal Synod has all the Prelates of the Malankara Church as members. Matters concerning Faith, Order and Discipline are under the authority of the Episcopal Synod. It is the Episcopal Synod which installs the Catholicos.

CONCLUSION

The Indian Church has an Apostolic foundation. Now with the establishment of the Catholicate in 1912 the Orthodox Church has come to its own.

Although majority of the members of the church numbering about 2.5 million live in Kerala, they could be found now spread over not only in all the different states of India, but also in all the continents through out the world. There are a total of 21 Dioceses now, 15 of them in Kerala and 6 of them outside Kerala ie Madras, Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, America and the Diocese of Canada-UK-Europe. Parishes outside India, other than those in the two Dioceses of America and Canada-UK-Euro.pe are included in the four Dioceses of Madras, Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi.

Orthodox Church is an Ancient, Autonomous, Independent, Indian Church whose Supreme Head is His Holiness The Catholicos of the East and Malankara Metropolitan, with headquarters at Catholicate Aramana, Devalokam, Kottayam, Kerala.

The Catholicate in India

The Catholicos is the supreme head of the Indian Orthodox Church. The present Catholicos is the 89th chronological successor to the Catholicate of the East founded by St. Thomas the Apostle in Seleucia, later revived in Tigris and relocated in 1912 in Kottayam. The prime jurisdiction regarding the temporal, ecclesiastical and spiritual administration of the church is vested in him, in his capacity as the Metropolitan of the Malankara Archdiocese. He is the trustee of the central assets of the Church, together with two elected co-trustees, a priest and a lay member of the Association

The Malankara Metropolitan, as all Metropolitans, is elected by the Malankara Association and approved by the Holy Episcopal Synod. The Catholicos presides over the Holy Episcopal Synod, which is the supreme authority in all matters concerning faith, order and discipline in the Church.

Catholicoses since 1653

Catholicos Baselios Mar Thoma Mathews - II (1991- Present)

1975 1991 V Catholicos Moran Mar Beselios Marthoma Mathews I

1964 1975 IV Catholicos Moran Mar Beselios Ougen

1929 1964 III Catholicos Moran Mar Beselios Geevarghese II

1925 1928 II Catholicos Moran Mar Beselios Geevarghese I

1912 1914 I Catholicos Moran Mar Beselios Paulose

1908 1934 Vattasseril Geevarghese Mar Dionysios VI

1864 1909 Pulicottil Joseph Mar Dionysios V

1843 1877 Palakunnathu Mathews Mar Athanasios

1825 1855 Cheppad Mar Dionysios IV

1817 1825 Punnathara Mar Dionysios III

1816 Mar Thoma IX

1816 1817 Mar Philoxenos, Kidangan (Thozhiyur)

1815 1816 Pulukottil Joseph Mar Dionysios II

1809 1816 Mar Thoma VIII

1808 1809 Mar Thoma VII

1796 Consecration of Metropolitan Mar Thoma VII

1772 Mar Thoma VI accepted Reordination by Mar Gregorios assisted by Mar Ivanios

1765 1808 Mar Thoma VI (Mar Dionysius I)

1761 Consecration of Metropolitan Mar Thoma VI

1728 1765 Mar Thoma V

1688 1728 Mar Thoma IV

1686 1688 Mar Thoma III

1670 1686 Mar Thoma II

1653 The first Indian Bishop Mar Thoma I was raised to the dignity by Twelve Priests