

## **CHURCHES ESTABLISHED BY ST. THOMAS:**

**BY Dr. B. Maria John**

The present paper entitled seven churches established by Apostle St. Thomas is an attempt to trace the history and oral tradition of the seven and half churches established by Apostle St. Thomas. Historians today believe that St. Thomas planned the seed of the gospel on Indian Soil. This is the general trend of their thinking. During the apostle's time there were well frequented trade routes by land and water connecting North India, the west coast and the east coast with north Africa, and the west Asia. Thus Alexandria, Aden, Socotra, Ormuz, Ctesiphon, Caesarea, Taxila, Branch, Kodungallur (Muziris) and even Rome were interlinked. The witness of different authors belonging to different places, churches, cultures centuries and races and often speaking different languages supporting the Apostle's Indian Mission provide an almost unassailable bulwark of evidence along with the South Indian tradition that is woven into a myriad detail of folklore, place names, family traditions, social customs, monuments, copper plates, ancient songs, liturgical texts etc.

The historic proofs of St. Thomas mission in India are many. Taking into account traditional evidence available in India and abroad, it may be said that the apostle was in India for approximately 17 years, Crosses carved on stone, some of which are attributed St. Thomas by unbroken tradition, have not seen lost posterity.

Oral tradition says that the foundations of Christianity were laid in India by St. Thomas the apostle of Jesus Christ. St. Thomas is said to have reached Kodurigallur port (Muziri) in 52 A.D. On reaching the shores of the Chera Country, St. Thomas is said to have received a spontaneous welcome from the Jews who already settled at Maliankara 9 Km south of the port. The apostle is said to have converted 40 Jews in Anguwanam and later converted many more natives. The Kerala Syrian Catholic tradition believes that St. Thomas built seven and a half churches on the western coast. The old and small Syrian Church of St. Mary at Thiruvithancode in the former South Travancore and the present Kanyakumari District is said to be the half church while other seven churches wherein:

1. Cranganore or Maliankara (present Kodungallur).
2. Palur or Palayur (near Thrissur).
3. Paravur of Kottakaru (a place near Cochin).
4. Kokkamangalam (a place near Chertalai).
5. Niranam a place (near Thiruvalla).
6. Chayal or Nilakkal an interior hill side place (near Sabarimalai) and
7. Quilon or Kollam.

According to an oral tradition, St. Thomas converted the brackish water into drinking water in a well near a Kurusadi at Chinna Muttom near Kanyakumari. At present is called as Thomaikinaru (Well of Thoma). The kurusadi popularly called Thomaipalli has also been built by St. Thomas himself.

### **Kodungallore Church:**

Ancient Muziris or Kodungallore is where St. Thomas arrived. This coastal town is situated 40 kms to south west of Thiruvananthapuram Kerala. The schematic map of the region around Kodungallur gives only a faint

suggestion of the landscape of the area which is hardly above sea land and abounding in canals and lagoons shape to flooding during rainy season. The land tripe 5 to 10 km broad near the sea shore show a every sign of beings nearly formed by the sea receding in recent times. It is not possible now to locate the ancient site of Chera kings precisely at any of the present sites of the environs of Kodungallor. No structure or building existing today in the area can be dated back to more than six centuries. Kodungallor of today is not even a shadow of its glorious secular past. There are sufficient historical testimonies to musires as a magnification harbor and the seat of the Chera Kings under the name of Thiruvanchkulam, which brings it down to about 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. but the data is too scanty to reconstruct a continuous history of the city. Kodungallor continued to be the city of considerable importance so that Portuguese, the Dutch and the English thought it worthwhile to make it one of their main bastion of power.

Nagam Aiya the compiler of the Travancore State manual has no doubt about the Malabar tradition. "There is not doubt as to the tradition that St. Thomas came to Malabar and converted a few families of Nambudiris some of whom were ordained by him as priests such as those of Sankarapuri and Pakalomattom. For, in consonance with this long-standing traditional belief in the minds of the people of the apostle's mission and labors among high caste Hindus. The wear clothes as Nambudiri women do, move about screening themselves with huge umbrellas from the gaze of profane eyes as those women do and will not marry except perhaps in exceptional cases and those only recently, but from among dignified families of similar aristocratic decent".

Kodungallor s the cradle of Christianity in India. The growth of Christianity in Kerala along the sea coast and its geographical dispersion indicate the importance of Kodungallor in the spread of the gospel message in Kerala and India. According to the strong Kerala tradition as found embedded in the Ramban song and in the collective consciousness of the whole land and people irrespective of creed or denomination. Kodungallor (Malaimkara) was the headquarter of apostle St. Thomas from where he organized and operated his various mission projects and apostolic journeys to the various mission canters.

There were a number of factors that must have prompted the saint to make K0dungallor his mission headquarters. For example, he himself had first landed in the land of Kerala in Chera country and India at Kodungallor. Even if he had gone to the land of king Gondophares earlier, as for as present's day India is concerned it was Kodungallor that first met the apostle and his message. And the possibility that the apostle might have come to Kodungallor itself, the post most accessible to foreign ships and premium emporium India before embarking for Taxila or Handhara along coasted route could not be totally rejected.

In fact, something quite similar happens in the song of St. Thomas Ramban St. Thomas constantly running back land forth between Kodungallor and his far-off mission stations. Perhaps he had to come to the great port city to get information, instructions and or funds from abroad via the captains of the many ships that arrived at Kodungallor (Both in the writings of foreign travellers and historians and in the Sangam literature there are innumerable references to the flourishing international trade that went on at Kodungallor and about the thriving flow of aliens into the land).

Another reason why the apostle constantly harks back to Kodungallor was that his missionary efforts in that cosmopolitan gateway city of India had proved highly rewarding from the very beginning. During his very first week in India, not only did the king of Tiruvanchikkulam and the royal family did accept the message, but also did he enable to consecrate the king's nephew as Bishop.

Thus, many other places and continents it was the royal patronage that made things easy for the spread of the Christian religion in Kerala. This would also explain how the Christians in Kerala came to enjoy all those royal privileges and rights like those of the seventy-two privileges mentioned in the various copper plates, grants and other trading rights granted by the 'Tazhekkattu Sasaban' etc. It was there that the apostle established the first Bishop with Xanthipus as Bishop. In remembrance of the ancient tradition of Cranganore, His Holiness Leo XIII did allow in 1886 the Bishop of Damao, the present extinct Diocese in the Bombay Presidency the use of the title "Arch Bishop of Cranganore".

### **Palayoor Church:**

The Church at Palayur is unique in that the present church is a continuous history of two millennia and stands the same spot where the Apostle first established it. The first church founded by St. Thomas continued to exist for many centuries. In 1607 the Italian Jesuits Fr. Finccio decide to construct a convenient church around the existing old structure for the parish of palayur after obtaining due permission the ecclesiastical authorities.

In true Kerala tradition, the Palayur pilgrim complex together with the Guruvayur temple and the Manathala Masjid forms a sacred triangle of religious harmony and communal amity, embracing the Arabian Sea and the Chetturai Azhimukam with the elephant resort at Guruvayur providing the in comparable sight of scores of domesticated elephants. The maximum number of historical monuments and artifacts connected with the life and mission of Apostle Thomas in Kerala are to be found in and around the Palayur church.

Palur or Palayur was the stronghold of the Nambudiri Brahmins ('the super class people in Indian communities) when St. Thomas arrived from Kodungallur. Israelites had a settlement at Palayur, two thousand years ago. Ruins of an ancient Jewish Synagogue are still seen outside of a Brahmin temple about a furlong away from the Churches. Broken pieces of idols, cultures and remnants of the old temple were lying around the church until a short time ago, two large tanks on the west and east gates are tell-tale relics of the ancient glory of the Hindu temple.

During the Portuguese time, an attempt to dismantle the old Church to construct a new one was given up owing to the sentimental objection of the local people. Later on, however a new church was built carefully, so as to enclose the old one, which had wooden walls.

Palayur was once the seat of a Bishop. This is evident from the Bull of pope Gregory XII dated 15<sup>th</sup> March 1580. It admonishes and directs the faithful to be obedient to their prelate Mar Abraham and George of Christ the Bishop of Palayur Obedite Vero. Persecution by Hyder Ali and Tippsultan, the tyrants of Mysore, in the seventeenth century, reduced this flourishing catholic centre to a state of decadence.

- The Boat jetty (Bottumkulam) where St. Thomas landed at Palayur.
- Thaliakulam – the Pond where St. Thomas baptized the local people.
- The replica of Chinna Malai (of Mylapore - Madras) where St. Thomas attained martyrdom in A.D. 72.
- The historical remnants of old Aryan temple.
- Historical Museum.
- 14 granite life size statues of various scenes from the life of St. Thomas installed on the main entrance of the church.

The jubilee door in front of the entrance of the main hall of the church depicting various important Biblical events, carved in Burmese teak. The beginning of the British rule in India (1797 - 93) saw the slow and steady rise of the present church. Strangely enough, there is not a single Brahmin house at present, in the Palayur village.

**Kottakkavu Church (Paravoor):**

Kottakkavu has a history behind its name. In the beginning of the Christian era, the western boundary of Paravoor was Venbnadu Lake. Muziris (Kodungallor) Malayankara and Paravoor are located on the banks of the same lake. Kottakkavu was a kava lying adjacent to this lake. As it was near the lake, it was also known as kottakkayal (fort by the lake). Those days most of the inhabitants of Paravoor were Brahmins. Pattamara Paravoor was one of the earliest settlements of the Brahmin migrants who came to Kerala. Politically a local ruler ruled this area by name Pandinivattath Swaroopam that was a Brahmin family.

Kottakkavu near parnur was the next center where the apostle preached the gospel and founded a church. According to the Ramban song, the apostle succeeded in receiving into the Christian fold one thousand seven hundred and seventy persons at this centre.

During the Portuguese times an attempt to dismantle the old church to construct a new one was given up owing to the sentimental objection of the local people later on however a new church was built carefully so as enclose the old one which had wooden walls.

St. Thomas who preached the gospel in the nook and corner of Kerala reached Kottakkavu at a time when the great festival was going on in its temple. The participant in the festival looked curiously at the apostle who was clad in a strange attire and who spoke in a different tongue. St. Thomas started speaking about Jesus Christ to the people who assembled then for worship. On hearing his speech, the devotees began to laugh at the disciple and asked him to flee from there. At this moment, the elephants kept in row for the festival as well as the onlookers started falling down onto the ground. A few of them lost their consciousness. The devotees became perplexed and overwhelmed by fear, they realized that the man whom they half poked fun of was actually a holy man. They pleaded to St. Thomas Muthappan (The word Muthappan stands for a saint who is looked upon as a protector) to rescue them from the mishap. The Apostle asked them to bring some water. He blessed the water in the name of the Holy Trinity and sprinkled it over them. All of a sudden, they all become conscious. There is a legend that when the saint sprinkled the water a third time some drops remained in the air and some was transformed into blood drops and flames. The people who witnessed this miracle started listening to the works of the apostle-and they whole-heartedly embraced the faith. Next, they thought of erecting a cross as a sign of embracing the new faith. It was decided that the cross should be erected on the spot where the elephant would place a log. The tusker carried the log to the sanctuary of the temple and left it there. The cross was erected there. The people who received faith from the apostle also included the priest of the temple and his family. Through it is not known as to how long did the saint live here, it is believed that 1770 people got baptized. The preaching of the apostle is evident from the Tamban Pattu.

In ancient folk songs it is seen that after the missionary work in other places, the saint reached Kottakkavu via maliankara and gave ordination to some who embraced the faith. It was the descendants of these people who ruled the Nazranis ever since.

In 880 A.D. Mar Sabor and Mar Proth who were brothers and Bishops came to Kerala. The former ruled over the see of Kodungallur, but when problems erupted there, he came to Diamper. Mar Proth rules as a Subordinate bishop in Kollam. These bishops constructed many churches using durable items like stone and wood, with which began the phase of building permanent church buildings. Paravoor Kottakkavu church was presumably built during this period. The Persian cross, which is preserved in the Chapel in front of the church, might have been engraved in rock in those days. After their demise both these bishops were revered as saints and churches were named after them. Later as per the decision taken in the Synod of Ds renamed after St. Garvasis and Prothesis.

The wooden cross which saint had planted in this place was kept in Kottakkava church till the 18th century. However, during the siege of Tipusultan, the churches in the regions of Kodungallur, Alangad, Paravur, Chinamangalam and Varapuzha were subjected to denotation. The cross was also destroyed at that time. The church ransacked at that time was the third one built after the saint's time. The church of 1308 was rebuilt with the Madbeha (It stands for the sanctuary of a church) H.E. Cardinal Varkey Vithyathil blessed the renovated church on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2002.

#### **Kokkamangalam Church:**

Kokkamangalam far to the north of Quilon, Niranom and Nilecal was the next centre of the missionary activities of St. Thomas. The Ramban song says that the apostle spent one year at Kokkamangalam and baptized one thousand and six hundred persons to Christianity Kokkamangalam is about 20 miles south of Parur. After planting a cross and opening a church there the apostle left the place. During the absence of the apostle unknown hands removed the cross from its site and threw it into the nearby backwater lagoon. The believers at Pallipuram installed the cross solemnly at a suitable place and a church was opened there.

Kokkamangalam is situated midway in the Cochin-Kumarakom International tourism route. The distance from the Cochin international airport to Kokkamangalam is 70 kilometres.

Universally, Christians appreciate the divinity of this land for association with apostle St. Thomas. It is a centre of attraction for pilgrims. Kokkamangalam church holds the middle position among the 7 churches founded by apostle St. Thomas.

Apostle stayed about one year in Kokkamangalam and preached the gospel. Eventually 1600 elite people embraced Christian faith through the apostle according to 'Rampan Pattu', and ancient form of Christian folk song. He organized a Christian Community at Kokka-Mangalam where he enshrined a cross and ordained a priest for the believers. The agile Christian Community is now flourishing at Kokkamangalam. Initially the people of Kokkamangalam and nearby places venerate St. Thomas as their beloved patron. They received ample favors through intercession of the saint. Later, fragrance of blessing spread beyond the limits. Devotees and tourists are captivated to Kokkamangalam from faraway places.

The miraculous portrait of St. Thomas venerated here was brought from the Carmelite monastery, Menanam in 1897 by one 'Albhutha Mathai' pursuant to a revelation. Now the portrait is in planted in an artistic model of a waft.

Pope John Paul II brought the Holy Relic of Apostle Thomas ensconced here from 'Orthona' in Italy to India in November 1999. The special Novena prayer on every Friday evening is an occasion to venerate the holy Relic. Devotees, those who aspire employment, especially abroad seek the intercession of the apostle. No wonder St. Thomas who himself made an adventurous voyage is generous to them.

The seven layers of Kerala lamps glowing in front of the Holy Relic denotes the integration of seven Christian communities founded by the apostle. Pouring coconut oil in this lamp is devout practice here. Devotees collect this oil as a sacred remnant to alleviate both spiritual and physical misery.

The procession of 'Holy Mattom', the evenness scale of St. Thomas is another pious custom which assures certain favour prayed for. It is evident that the faithful carrier attains evenness in life.

The Lourdes Mariyan Groto commemorates the papacy silver jubilee of the Pope John Paul II and the Rosary year. This grotto enriched the pilgrim face of the church complex.

Number of Biblical scenes where Jesus appear with his beloved disciple Thomas constitute the marvellous sculpture conflux. The first one is the scene of Galilee. Apostle Thomas positively responds to the call of this Master, Jesus. The next one denotes sermon on the Mount, where Thomas was eagerly listening to his master. Another visual, Jesus healing the blind man at Bethesda where his disciple St. Thomas is watching with reverence. Apostle Thomas, valiant among disciples initiates others by saying, "Let us also go to Lazarus of Bethani, along with our master, that we may die with him". In the next scene Jesus, deputed Thomas to India with the mission of evangelization. Thomas agreed to his master with utmost pleasure. Never can we find anywhere in the world such a fantastic Thomas manifestation.

Artistically instituted Marthoma Jubilee Cross is a symbol of pristine granduar. This is a replica of the cross-founded by apostle at Kokkamangalam. This splendid granite caving is an unparallel one, in Indian church. Symbols of seven churches carved around the pedestal of the cross and the granite lamp fixed adjacent are contributing to the splendor of this Cross Menhir.

The matchless antique collection of Kokkamangalam is a treasure house of exhibits which throw light to the past. Research scholars, pilgrims and tourists can study the history and culture of this glorious land through them.

The principal feast Puthu Njayar Thirunal is observed on the first Sunday after Easter. Thousands of people, irrespective of caste and creed participate in the feast with utmost

serenity. The celebrations begin on Thursday and conclude on Sunday. The colourful pompous procession is a special attraction.

‘Dukhrana’ feast that falls, on 3 July, marking the martyrdom of St. Thomas is also celebrated here with great devotion. A special ‘Pachor nercha’ is distributed among participants.

‘The Thiruseshipur Parthista Thirunal’ observed every 13 of November commemorates the enshrining of the Holy Relic attract devotees from all over the world.

### **Niranam Church:**

Niranam is almost midway between Quilon and Kokkamangalam is now in the hands of Jacobites. The church underwent many reconstructions and modifications. At present, the fourth building is in the place of the original church that was believed to be founded by apostle St. Thomas. It was consecrated by His grace vattasseri Gee Varghese Deanious. The Malankara Metropolitan on 14 February 1912 A.D.

The apostle and prince Kepha proceeded from Quilon in a north-easterly direction and arrived at Thirakapaleswarem, near Niranam. Thirukapalewarem had Hindu temples at the time, and to provide a place of public worship to the Christian community the apostle planted a cross a few furlongs away to the west of one of the temples. The non-Christian people in the locality did not like this and they pulled it out and cast it into the nearby river.

This desecration took place sometime after the apostle had left the place for Chayal or Malakal. Two Christians from Thirakapaleswarem went there and requested the apostle to re-visit their place and set matters right. The Cross that had been thrown out into the river moved downwards floating on the waters for some distance, and eventually rested on a strip of land on the opposite bank of the river. Here at Niranam for two months and during this period, he was giving new vigor and strength to the Christian community. He baptized two hundred persons. Local tradition is that most of the Namboothiri's having been made Christians by St. Thomas left the place after giving the boxes containing the document relating to their landed properties to a Kymal or Nair Chieftain who had since been known as Nirnam Petti Kaymal. Of the various miracles performed by St. Thomas at Niranam, the most remarkable was the restoration of life to a child of barber put to death by anti-Christian families, who wanted to throw the responsibility for the crime on the apostle.

### **Nilakal Church:**

All the Churches save the one at Chayal (Nilakal) are on the coast or very near it. Chayal is situated very much in the interior on the Savarimala Hill. The old churches are now in a dilapidated state amidst jungles.

When St. Thomas was doing missionary work, he established seven Churches and among those churches. Nilakal (Chayal) was contained. The apostle returned from Niranam to Chayal or

Nilackal. According to the Ramban Song the apostle worked here for one year and during this period one thousand and one hundred persons were converted to Christianity.

There is not any historical evidence about St. Thomas missionary work at Nilakal but it is written in old metal plates, Marthomma charitham, veeradiyan song and many historians writing about certain vague assumption that St. Thomas established a church at Nilakal.

Many Christian families in Kanjiirappaly, Ayriir and other places trace their origin to Nilakal, there is a Mar St. Thomas church at Ayroor which is still named Chayal (Nilakal). Efforts were made recently to rebuild a church at Nilkkal, which led to opposition from the Hindu community, even though there is evidence of Christian church, and a Hindu temple, which existed there side by side in olden days, as, can be found now in many other places in Kerala. The difficulties were solved by the magnanimous approach from both Hindu friends and Christian leaders and the help extended by the Kerala Government.

Following this, new church has been built under the joint auspices of all the Christian denominations at the site agreed upon by all concerned, a little distance away from the earlier site. This church is having historical significance as the first church built and dedicated by all the denominations together as symbol of the heritage from St. Thomas.

### **Kollam Church:**

Quilon was the next scene of the labor of the apostle. Quilon (Kollam) still a big town almost the second capital of the Travancore state is one of the most ancient Episcopal sees in India. It was erected by Pope John XXII in 1330. The Church built by St. Thomas in Kollam is one of the great catholic centers of India (In later stage) is believed to have existed for upwards for a thousand years, when it was swept away by the sea. The majority of the people of Quilon belonged to the Chattiya caste the recognized trading caste of the time. A good many of them accepted the gospel attracted by the preaching of the apostle and the miracles performed by him. Many inhabitants of Quilon hated the new religion and migrated from Quilon to Vanjinad to keep them away from the influence of the new religion after erecting a cross for the worship of the converts who numbered about one thousand and four hundred. The apostle left Quilon.

It is believed that in 54 A.D. St. Thomas Apostle came to Quilon and found a church. The church is not a build one but, an Ecclesia people of God-Group of believers who accepted faith. St. Thomas preached the word of God and lived under the tree and shadows.

Ancient fort, which had trade with ancient Roman Empire and therefore Kollam was the ancient port. Then for many years, there was no evidence. In 1329, Pope John XXII erected the Diocese of Quilon by appointing Johnson Catholic priest as the first Bishop of Quilon. This Bishop travelling back to Rome was martyred in Thane by pirates. There is a letter in the Bishop's house from the Pope John XXII thanking the Christians in Quilon who received the delegates of the Pope with great faith so that is an evidence that there were Christians in Quilon. In 1554 when Portuguese and Quilon Dioceses made some treaty and then built a church in Quilon. For 400 years, this church was existing and destroyed by sea erosion. Remnants of the church is supposed to be seen in the deep sea even now seen by fishermen. The present church is the 4<sup>th</sup> church, foundation stone is blessed by the Pope John Paul II.



### **Thiruvithancode Church:**

St. Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ landed at Kodunganalloor the ancient port of Malabar coast in the year of 52 A.D. There is a strong tradition among the people in Kerala that the origin and influence of Christianity in the strips of the sandy tract stretching from Kodunglloor to Kanyakumari.

The old church at Thiruvithancode from which the State of Travancore took its name are considered to be the most ancient churches in the district and they are said to have been consecrated by St. Thomas himself. According to Kerala tradition, St. Thomas erected seven and a half churches on the western coast and the old and small Syrian church of St. Mary at Thiruvithancode, now in Kanyakumari District is considered as a half church while the other seven churches are in Kerala.

In Kanyakumari District, one cannot forget the Church of Our Lady at Thiruvithancode erected by St. Thomas himself, which paved the way for the spread of Christianity in this area.

It can be understood from the foregoing study that even in the absence of any documented history, the universal and oral traditions are unanimous in their views that St. Thomas' arrival in India in A.D. 52. The apostle faced martyrdom at Mylapore in Madras around A.D. 72. That he founded seven and a half churches is true from the imprints and tradition. The present paper presenter had made an attempt to visit all the seven places and collected the relevant sources for writing this paper with a historical perspective.

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