

Wonder

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Title: **The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in India** Author: **Fr. Samji George**

Apostolic Origin

In AD 52 the Apostle St. Thomas landed on the coast of Cranganore (presently north of Kochi, in the state of Kerala, India). He preached the good news to both the Jewish settlers and the local people. He established churches in seven places namely Maliankara (the name Malankara is derived from Maliankara), Palayur, Paravur, Gokamangalam, Niranam, Chayal and Kollam. He also appointed leaders to these churches from leading families who he converted to the Christian faith. He then moved to the eastern parts of South India and later on to Malacca and China. He returned to India, and according to tradition was martyred and buried at Mylapore (near Chennai) in AD 72.

Though there is no written evidence of the evangelization of India by the Apostle St. Thomas, the living Christian tradition found in India agrees to this fact. This living tradition is affirmed by scholars and historians. The tomb of St. Thomas has been a pilgrim center for the faithful, from the early centuries. The 3rd century Syrian writing 'Acta Thoma' (Acts of the Apostle Judas Thomas) says that the Apostle Thomas worked in India and was killed on the top of a hill in the kingdom of Mazdai. From here parts of the bones of the Apostle were taken to Edessa by a Syrian merchant named Khabin. In the 4th century, St. Ephrem the Syrian testifies to this fact and composed hymns on the mission of St. Thomas in India, his martyrdom and removal of his bones to Edessa. Accounts of early church historians and travelers prove the existence of a Christian community in the southern part of India.

Indian Church in the Medieval Ages

Scholars are of the unanimous opinion that the Malankara Church had relations with the East Syrian Church from the 3rd century. The persecution in the Persian Church led to immigration from Persia to the church in Malankara in the 4th century. One such major immigration recorded is that of 72 families under the leadership of a certain Thoma of Cana. Various other sources including the excavation of Persian crosses prove that the Church in India had East Syrian relations. The Portuguese who came to India in the year 1498 made efforts to Latinize the Christian community here. The Portuguese colonialists were successful in curbing all East Syrian relations of the Malankara Church. The Synod of Diamper in 1599 under the leadership of Bishop Alexios Menezis put the last nail in the East Syrian relations. He burned all available liturgy in East Syrian and prevented any Prelates from Persia entering the Malankara Church.

But the Malankara Church rejected the Latin yoke and chose to be an independent Church, through an oath called the 'Coonan Cross Oath' in 1653. Soon they ordained their first indigenous Bishop, Marthoma I. At the request of the Malankara Church, a bishop named Gregorios from Antioch came to Malankara in 1665. This established the relationship with the West Syrian Patriarchate. The faith of the Church was established on the three ecumenical councils, of Nicaea, Constantinople and Ephesus. Through interactions with the West Syrian

Bishops and clergy in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Malankara Church embraced the West Syrian liturgy and traditions.

In the 20th century

Western colonialism and internal strife interrupted the development of the Church in Malankara. However, with the help of the West Syrian Prelate, a Catholicate was established in the Malankara Church in the year 1912. This helped the Church to be an autonomous and autocephalous Church like any other Orthodox Church. The Malankara Orthodox Church is one of the founding members of the World Council of Churches (WCC). It has produced theologians like Metropolitan Dr. Paulose Mar Gregorios who was the President of the WCC and the Principal of the Orthodox Theological Seminary at Kottayam, Kerala. The contributions of Fr. Dr. V.C. Samuel have been instrumental in bridging the gap between the Oriental Orthodox and the Eastern Orthodox. The dialogue between these traditions has resulted in an agreement that they hold the same Christological position and have agreed to have shared the same faith.

The Indian Orthodox Church Today

H. H. Baselios Marthoma Paulose II is the present Catholicos of the Malankara Church, with head quarters at Kottayam, Kerala. There are 33 Metropolitans, 30 dioceses and 2 million faithful spread round the world. We have seminaries at Kottayam and Nagpur to train the Clergy. There are mission training centers as well as programs for the laity of the Church. We look forward to meet the challenges of the 21st century and to be witnesses of Christ our Lord.

Fr. Samji George is an Indian Orthodox priest and monk. He is a management graduate who joined the Mount Horeb monastic community in South Kerala a south west state of India in 1998. Fr. Samji later graduated from the Orthodox Theological Seminary, Kottayam, India and is presently pursuing a theological program at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary.