

ORIGIN OF CHRISTIANITY IN SOUTH INDIA: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CRITIQUES- A REVIEW

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Abstract

It has been a forced departure from the idea of narrating historical stages of Christianity in South India but to delve on the existing historiography on early South Indian Christianity. The rationale behind is that the writings of different authors about the emergence of Christianity in India, south India in particular has still been not accepted completely and kept as a debatable topic. Paucity of primary data in this particular field makes historians handicapped. The available historical sources comes in the way of '*tradition*' are not sufficient to satisfy international community on this important socio-cultural history of India. The fact is that there are many areas in the historical past for which historians do not have sources to construct them elaborately for understanding. They fell right in the historical period for which historians supposedly have plenty of sources to understand that stages. These are the black holes exist in historical past. This could completely turn around the structure of a particular society if not a whole state when they are explored and understood. The early history of Christianity in south India cannot be put under Dark Age type either, as it has some sources (Indian tradition) and references (apocryphal writings on Indian Christianity) to build an idea. Nevertheless, array of historical writings both in missionary perspectives and historical methods on this field has been established from 3rd century AD for the first type and from 19th century AD for the second type. The missionary based writings are declining in postcolonial setup. Through Eric Frykenberg's self accusation of his own *master narratives* with post colonial and subaltern methods one can observe that shift had happened quite long before his original work on the '*Christianity in India: From the Beginnings to the Present*'. Religious texts always have evangelical proselytizing trait inherited onto them. Understanding the psycho lingual nuances, embedded objectives and contexts of these texts are very difficult for even a trained historian to maintain historical objectivity let alone the common reader. This is the problem of the given topic. However, acceptance, towards *historical truths* will lead us to the destination of historical objectivity.

Here, some writings and their subjective themes are derived in order to understand the problem.

1. The Apocryphal writing,

The *Acts of Thomas* identifies St.Thomas' two missions in the east. One in north western India (Taxila) and another one in south India with a kingdom ruled by King Mahadeva, one of the rulers of a 1st-century dynasty in southern India.

It is most significant that, aside from a small remnant of the Church of the East in Kurdistan, the only other church to maintain a distinctive identity is the Mar Thoma or "Church of Thomas" congregations along the Malabar Coast of Kerala State in southwest India. According to the most ancient tradition of this church, Thomas evangelized this area and then crossed to the Coromandel Coast of southeast India, where, after carrying out a second mission, he died in Mylapore near Madras. Throughout the period under review, the church in India was under the jurisdiction of Edessa, which was then under the Mesopotamian patriarchate at Seleucia-Ctesiphon and later at Baghdad and Mosul.

2. Regionalists:

Mundadan argues that,

"...there is no connecting link between Thomas and Gondaphares. Thomas was not in the Punjab"... in the light of '*Acta Thoma*'.

In the *Acta Thomae* reference has been made about an eastern king called *Gudnophar* and St.Thomas visited his kingdom in view of spreading Christian message. There are two problems emerges which requires clarification. Identification of these different nomenclatures whether they are same or different or atleast have some relation, is still doubtful because of lack of evidences which requires research on the early languages of that region. The next is that during that period many kings of Indo-Parthian rulers were given the title 'Gondophares'. According to Mundadan the Pahalavas (Pallavas) are belonged to the Indo-Parthian rulers, and they moved southward in the early years of first millennium. St.Thomas could have contemplated with those rulers who might have ruled the southern region with the title of Gudnophar and thereby reference has been made in the Act. This is not to be misunderstood with the north Indian Gondophares. Hence, the idea of St.Thomas first mission was in north western India is quite unacceptable but his south Indian mission is the early mission in India Mundadan claims. The reference about Socorta Christians in the *Periplus of Erithrean Sea* is to be handled scientifically rather to make distortions.

3. Positivists

Vincent A. Smith says that,

"It must be admitted that a personal visit of the Apostle Thomas to South India was easily feasible in the traditional belief that he came by way of Socotra, where an ancient Christian settlement undoubtedly existed. I am now satisfied that the Christian church of South India is extremely ancient".

If we look at the fact in another perspective one could observe the nature of the *Acta Thomae*. Gondophares I of Taxila belonged to 20-40 AD. The *Acta Thomae* has an important portion in that, i.e, St.Thomas and Jesus Christ has attended a marriage at Taxila around 40 AD. This is quite apocryphal since the period fall well after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (28 AD). So Mundadan's negation against the north Indian mission has more substantive factors. However Mundadan himself faces critique when he claims his opinion on St.Thomas mission in Malabar region belonged to first century AD without put forwarding sufficient evidences.

4. Post-Colonilaists

Benedict Vadakkekara

-is a research scholar at the Capuchin Historical Institute in Rome. He teaches Fransiscan Mission History at Pontifical University Antonianum. He is a member of St.Joseph Province (India) of the Franciscan Capuchin Order and has to his credit several publications especially in the area of Fransiscan history and spirituality.

Forward written by Dr.K.N.Panikkar, 2007, Media House, Delhi

Chapter 2: Identification of early Christians

... The introduction of *East Syriac* as the liturgical language of ancient Indian Christianity is said to have been facilitated by the fact that some of the first converts were of Jewish origin... According to a legend St.Thomas was asked to travel on sea in order to reach India and spread the message of Jesus Christ to the Jews who are already settled there.

‘The way of St.Thomas’

.....Against the backdrop of pressurization by Portuguese Padroado personnel in second half of the 16th century to alter communal ways the Indian Christians are seen dodgedly holding on to their traditional usages and practices precisely on the plea that these had the sanction of Apostle Thomas himself. They qualified their lifestyles as “the way of St.Thomas”. They also knew that Christians in other lands are in their own ways”. Therefore they naively expected the Portuguese to respect their “way of St. Thomas”..... Syriac their liturgical language..... in the synod of Diamper (1599) Portuguese were able to force hand of their leaders and have them adopt numerous Lusitanian manners by making their Indian brethren concede that “ the way of St.Thomas’ did not differ from “ the way of St.Peter”

Padroado's declaration...

“... () the same principle cannot unfortunately be applied to India. No early Indian has ever written the history of the church of India and all our information concerning even the mere **existence of a Christian community side by side with Brahmanism and Buddhism** in the immense country stretching from south of modern Afghanistan and Baluchistan to the Indian

Ocean is almost exclusively derived from Syriac and Greek authors of 3rd and 4th century. Now these authors, having no particular interest in India refer to the Church questions that affect in a very casual way. Their references are at best *obiter dicta*, which by the nature of the case constitute only imperfectly disconnected and scattered pieces of evidence.”

But after having read this Padroada’s version carefully Benedict Vadakkekara questions the status of the *traditions* as a source to construct this invincible past. Particularly from the context of identity issue to the present Christians in Malabar who links their origin to St.Thomas.

‘.....At the same time, one may ask if St.Thomas were to be ruled out of every direct connection with the coming into being of their community, would their traditional assertion be clarified in a way that squares with the ascertainable part of their history’. It is here that the historians’ role becomes vital and indispensable.

5. Liberal Orientalists

Robert Eric Frykenberg

He has produced lot of literatures related to south Indian culture and particularly on religion and missionary activities. His first work was *Guntur District: 1788- 1848* published in 1965. In his work “*Christianity in India: from Beginnings to the Present*” (OUP 2008) he has discussed about the origin of Indian Christians by using the missionary literatures rather any antiquities. But he had well understood the tradition of the Christian communities through having observed their oral history. In that way, he established a new trend in writings on Indian Christianity. This, we can understand from reviewers of his writings.

Jeffrey Cox for example,

...() Interestingly, until earlier Frykenberg himself has been accused of perpetuating his own master narrative. In the *Imperial Fault Lines* for example, Jeffrey Cox includes a discussion of the work of Frykenberg and others under the heading, “The Providentialist Master Narrative” and make distinct the Frykenberg’s work. His main understanding appears to be that scholars like Frykenberg exhibited distinction between missionaries and imperial military officers, government officials, merchants, and scholars. Though, by doing so obscure the many ways in which missionaries were implicated in systems of “imperial coercion and control” there is no doubt that Frykenberg’s influence has inspired a significant number of western scholars working on Indian Christianity to shift their scholarly gaze away from missionaries—the traditional focus of western histories of “Indian Christianity”—and toward Indian Christians themselves.

‘*Indian Christian Historiography from Below, from Above, and in Between*’ the article published in *Church History* (book) edited by Richard Fox Young in honor of Eric Frykenberg.

‘.....Frykenberg matters to historians of Christianity because, beginning in the mid-1970’s he began to write about Indian Christians. When he did so, he adopted the same approach as in his earlier work, writing “bottom up” histories of Indian Christians focusing on how they mediated, translated, and altered the message to which they had been introduced by missionaries’.

6. Empiricists

a) Pius Melakkandathil

His contribution to this field is based on scientific scrutiny of sources. He also did not confirm the sources pertaining to the presence of St.Thomas rather attested some of the writings and tried to portray his opinion through those attestations. His personal research and writings are focused on maritime history touching mainly upon the technical, economic, cultural and political aspects of it. However one can find his submerged vision on tracing the history of Indian Christianity in a more scientific way on his present works.

Maritime India: Trade Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean-(book)

Title of the article: “*Christian mercantile migrants of Quilon and the socio-economic significance of the Tharisapally copper plate*”

Information on *Acta of Thomae*:

Pius Melakkandathil has quoted Harold W. Attridge who describes the *Acta of Thomae* as follows: (*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, v. 6, p. 531):

‘...Pseudo epigraphic text relates the adventures of apostle Judas Thomas as he preaches an ascetical or encratite form of Christianity on the way to and from India. Like other apocryphal acts combining popular legend and religious propaganda, the work attempts to entertain and instruct. In addition to narratives of Thomas' adventures, its poetic and liturgical elements provide important evidence for early Syrian Christian traditions.

Attridge writes about the attestations to the Acts of Thomas (op. cit., p. 531):

The original composition is probably to be dated in the first half of the 3d century, slightly later than the Acts of Peter, John, and Paul, which are attested in the 2nd century. Some sections, particularly the originally independent *Hymn of the Pearl*, presuppose conditions in the Parthian period, which ended with the establishment of the Sassanian Empire in 226 C.E. It is likely that *Acts Thomae* underwent redactional development, including adaptation by Manicheans, in the late 3rd or 4th centuries. Some form of the work was clearly in circulation by the end of the 4th century when testimonies begin. Epiphanius (Anac. 47.1 and 60.1.5) records its use by Encratites. Augustine (de serm. dom. in monte 1.20.65; c. Adiamantium 17; c. Faustum 14 and 22.79) attests its use by Manicheans, and allusions are found in the Manichean Psalms. Attestations continue sporadically until the 9th century Byzantine patriarch Photius (Cod. 114) and the 11th century archbishop, Nicetas of Thessalonica, who paraphrased the work.

The major Syriac witnesses (B.M. add. 14.645) dates to 936 C.E. the earliest Syriac witnesses to the text, a fragmentary palm set (Sinai 30), dates from the 5th or 6th century. The major Greek witnesses (Paris. gr.1510 and Vallicel. B 35) dates to the 11th century though there are partial Greek witnesses dating from the 10th century.

Pius Melakandathil in his another work called “The Mughals and The Portuguese and the Indian Ocean: Changing imageries of Maritime India” talks about the conflict between the colonizers and the indigenous inhabitants of Malabar region in the question of adherence to their tradition. In the following words one can easily understand the historical method used by Pius Melakandathil.

‘...Fr. Thomas Paremakkal and Fr.Joseph Kariyattil made their travels to Portugal and Rome on the decision of the general body of the St.Thomas Christians taken at Angamaly for the purpose of informing the Pope and the Queen of Portugal of the various discriminations, sufferings and difficulties that this community experienced over a considerable period of time from the foreign Carmelite missionaries working in Kerala. As the general meeting of the representatives of this community at Angamaly was dominated by feelings of anger and animosity against the European religious missionaries and the European bishop working then in Kerala, the travelogue has anti-Europeanism as its basic thread, critiquing the hegemonic and colonial fabric of the Church set up by the European missionaries. Stressing the need for going back to the pre-Portuguese days when democratic institutions of yogams(representative body at the grass root-levels) mahayogams(representative bodies at higher levels) with jathikku karthaviyan (head of the community) existed among this community for their administration, instead of one-man centered or European notion of bishop- centered administration, the travelogue challenges the notion of authority that the European missionaries had set up within the colonial fabric they newly created for the Church of the St.Thomas Christians.

Pius Melakkandathil, quotes Paremakkal

‘On the feast-day of Theresa of Avila there was 40 hours adoration at Verapoly. Fr.Jacob Puthenpurackal, the parish priest of Edappilly church also went for the adoration and returned to his parish church along with other people. The European Carmelite missionaries forgot to lock the church after dinner and on the next day the gold monstrance was found to be missing. Suspecting Fr. Jacob to be the thief he was taken by force to Verapoly by the missionaries and was denied food for several days. He fell ill and died. His last request before death for receiving Holy Communion too was denied. He was also denied a church burial, as his body was wrapped up in a mat and buried near a pond³⁶.

Citing the incident Paremakkal says that this happened because of the “helplessness of the people of Malankara (Kerala)” and “the mighty and power of the missionaries and their bishop”³⁷. He refers to this incident repeatedly in his travelogue, whenever he felt that the missionaries were obstructing the moves of the delegation of the St.Thomas Christians in Europe to obtain an Indian bishop.

b) Prof.George Menachery

At present he is engrossed in the work of completing the Christian Encyclopedia, and the Church History Classics, and in setting up a comprehensive Indian Christian Museum. His contribution to the present topic is enormous in terms of the information particularly the chronology of the Indian Christianity which could further add the sources to construct a more objective history.

He gives,

The Nazarenes: A Rough Chronology

30	The Crucifixion
40s	Apostle Thomas in the service of King Gondaphares in Takshasila
52 Nov 21	St. Thomas, the apostle, landed at Cranganore (Kodungalloor, in the present Thrissur District)
52-72	The Apostle builds 7 churches: Palayoor, Kodungalloor, Parur, Kokamangalam, Niranam, Nilackal, Kollam.
72 Jul. 3	Martyrdom of St. Thomas in the vicinity of Mylapore, Madras.
98-117	Mesopotamia and Assyria become Roman provinces.
190	Pantaenus, probably the founder of the famous Catechetical School of Alexandria, visited India and the Nazranies.
232	Sassanians become a major power.
325	Archbishop John, of Persia and Great India, at the first Ecumenical Council of Nicea.
345	Thomas of Cana from Persia landed at Cranganore with 72 families of immigrants.
340-360	By the Thazhekad Sasanam the Nazranies granted special rights and privileges.
400	North Pudukkad church founded.
480	St. Hormis church, Angamaly founded.
500	Enammavu church founded.
503	St. George church, Edappally founded.
510	Udayamperore (Diamper) church built.
522	Cosmas Indicopleustes visits South India.
570	Birth of Mohammad, Prophet of Islam in Mecca.

c) Romila Thapar

In her personnel work “*Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*” (book) she has written an article titled ‘*South Asia and the Roman Maritime Trade*’ in which She writes that,

Unlike the Indian Ocean trade of later times when Islam and Christianity provided a religious backing to the trading networks, the Roman trade did not carry a religion. Those that came from the Mediterranean were largely worshippers of Greco-Roman and Egyptian deities,

with possibly some early Christians. There is an absence of recognizable representations of such deities in India. Nor is there a presence of Christianity at this time although the picture changes by the middle of the millennium.

“Christian texts written in the eastern Mediterranean begin to mention Christian missions from the second century AD and the establishment of the church in South India and Sri Lanka by about the sixth century AD. The council of Nicea in AD 325 lists an Indian connection and there is later evidence of a Nestorian mission. Still later, Syrian Christians are said to have settled in Kerala”.

.....Burton Stein, Subbarayalu, Champaka Lakshmi did not include the history of Christianity in south India for their research.

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