

PART 1

BRIEF HISTORY AND LITERARY SOURCES OF BLESSED MARIAM THRESIA

Introduction

Lord Jesus invites everyone to a life of perfection. “You therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt.5:48). Therefore everyone in any state or walk of life is called to the fullness of Christian life, that is, to the perfection of love (L.G.40). The most essential requirement for perfection is charity. Anyone who has attained perfection of love of God and of neighbour can be called perfect. Though all are called to this life of perfection, only a few respond to this call seriously and lead a heroic life of charity.

Blessed Mariam Thresia, a very simple unassuming, remote village girl is one among those rare persons who lived up to this call in a heroic manner. Each person has a background history that helps determine what he /she is. In order to learn the mystical experience of Mariam Thresia, it is indeed necessary to know the background in which she was born and brought up, the family in which she was moulded, the spiritual sources which helped her rise the heights of mystical union. Part 1 is an introduction to the mystical experience of Mariam Thresia which sheds light on her life background, short life history and spiritual sources.

CHAPTER – 1

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The first chapter of Part 1 discusses the historical background of the place where Thresia was born. This includes a brief description of Kerala, its socio political, religious and cultural situation during her life time and also a brief account of the historical importance of her birth place and her family background.

1.1 Kerala, the Land of Blessed Mariam Thresia

Puthenchira¹, the village in which Thresia was born is situated in the central part of Kerala, in Thrissur District. Kerala is a small state, a fairly narrow strip of land 3886 sq. km in area, (1.8% of the total area of India) which lies between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea, stretching from Cape Comerin about 359 miles northwards up to Dakshina Karnataka. The vegetation is exuberant and the whole region is characterized by forest, paddy fields, coconut groves, estates of rubber, tea, cardamom, pepper and other crops. The fairly high range of mountains on the east and north cut off this land from the rest of India. This geographical isolation of Kerala from the rest of India by the mountains on its eastern border facilitated the development of its people with their own particular Indian ethos with highly independent, even individualistic, traits. Kerala's mother tongue is Malayalam, while the official language of India is Hindi. Kerala has its own subculture, habits, traditions, dress, festivals, and entertainments and so on. Kerala's identity was shaped also by its openness to the west, facilitated by Kodungallore, the ancient seaport which is very close to the native village of Mariam Thresia, with a flourishing trade with several countries like Syria and Babylone, Rome and Greece. Kerala thus developed into a meeting place of many cultures and peoples of the west and east.²

1.2 Political Situation

India was under British rule from 1791 to 1947. During the lifetime of Mariam Thresia the movement for freedom from the British colonial power gained ground.

¹ Vithayathil, *Biography of Mother Mariam Theresia*, translated by Sr. Philo Ivantia, Mannuthy: (Holy Family Publications, 2008), 15; Original manuscript kept in the Archives of the Congregation of the Holy Family, CHFA. O8,1.

² Mathias Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol.1, Bangalore: (Church History of Association of India,2001),15-18.

The south west of India, namely the present Kerala consisted of three provinces at that time: Malabar, Kochi and Travancore. Malabar Province was directly administered by the British and the princely states of Kochi and Travancore were ruled by hereditary *Rajas* (the kings). The *Rajas* entered into treaties with British East India Company and had to govern following the advice of a representative of the British. Mariam Thresia's village, Puthenchira came under Travancore Province. From the eighteenth century Travancore had a series of the kings who were highly educated and cultured and took to heart the welfare of their subjects. The British model of education and other values were easily welcomed and introduced in Travancore and Cochin, but not in the Province of Malabar occupied by many petty feudal kings, where the Muslims gained ascendancy and the British ruled directly.³

1.3 Growth of Christianity in Kerala

The Indian Oriental Catholic Church or the Syro-Malabar Church,⁴ to which Mariam Thresia belonged, according to a strong living tradition, was founded by the Apostle Thomas⁵. According to tradition, the place where the Apostle Thomas landed in A.D.52 was Maliankara, adjoining the ancient port of Cranganore, at present known as Kodungallore. After preaching and establishing Christian communities in different parts of India St. Thomas suffered martyrdom in 72 A.D. at Mylapure. Traditions hold that St. Thomas founded seven churches⁶ or communities in Kerala. These apostolic communities called themselves the Christians of St. Thomas⁷. They had their own customs, traditions and usages, which they zealously preserved. At the same time they adapted themselves to the existing cultural milieu within which they were located.

³ *Positio Super Virtutibus: Beatification and Canonization of the Servant of God Mariam Thresia Chiramel Mankidiyan (1876-1926), Foundress of the Congregation of the Holy Family*, Congregation for the cause of saints, Rome: (1996),15. Hereinafter this work is abbreviated simply as *Positio*, Informatio/Summarium.

⁴ The term Syro- Malabar Church came into general use only by the middle of the nineteenth century, when it was used to distinguish the community of St. Thomas Christians subject to the prelates of Latin jurisdiction in Malabar from the Syro- Chaldeans. The term Syro- Malabar denotes for the ancient Catholic community in the whole of India. For details see Andrews Thazath, *The juridical sources of the Syro-Malabar Church*, Kottayam: (Pontifical Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, 1987), chapters 5&6.

⁵ Apostle Thomas - One of the 12 Disciples of Jesus Christ. Jn. 11:16

⁶ The seven churches were at Kodungallore, Kollam, Chayal, Niranam, Kokkamangalam, Kottakkavu and Palayur; Mathias, Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 29-31.

⁷ Tisserant Cardinal Eugene, *Eastern Christianity in India*, Calcutta: (Orient Longman's private Ltd., 1957), 1.

Towards the middle of fourth century St. Thomas Christians came into contact with a group of emigrants from the East Syrian Church. This relationship made the St. Thomas Christians share the liturgical, spiritual and other ecclesiastical traditions with the East Syrian Church. Those who followed the East Syrian Church traditions strictly were grouped under Chaldean rite, whereas St. Thomas Christians kept their distinctive character in Church administration and in socio cultural and spiritual life.⁸ By the end of the fifteenth century the Portuguese arrived with the colonial power and took over the ecclesiastical leadership of the Church of Thomas Christians in an epoch – making synod held at Diamper in 1599. This has resulted in the latinization of Eastern Christianity a process which eventually provoked organised revolt in 1653 (*Koonan* cross oath) and later gave rise to splinter groups of Oriental Christians. One such group got affiliated to the West Syrian Church, and is known as Syro Orthodox/Jacobite Church. This was again divided into two groups from which a group was united with the Catholic Church in 1930 and is now known as the Syro Malankara church⁹.

One group of Thomas Christians continued to recognise the prelates appointed by Rome for a period of time. As they were not happy with the administration of foreign missionaries and Vicar apostolic sent by Rome, agitation and turmoil arose against them. As the grievance of St. Thomas Christians gained momentum, in 1887 Pope Leo XIII erected for the Thomas Christians two apostolic vicariates – Thrissur and Kottayam, and nominated Adolf Medlycott and Charles Levigne respectively for the two Sees, thus separating the Orientals, the Syro Malabarians from the Latin See of Verapoly. In 1896 they were entrusted by the same Pope to the care of three indigenous prelates of three apostolic vicariates - Thrissur, Ernakulam and Changanachery. Mar John Menachery, Mar Louis Pazheparambil and Mar Mathew Makil were appointed respectively to these three apostolic vicariates.¹⁰ It was in the Thrissur vicariate of Bishop John Menachery that the Blessed Mariam Thresia lived.

In India Kerala has the highest number of Christians. Traditionally Christians in Kerala developed their religious spirit from a Church centred discipline. Besides praying rosary in devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary in the families, they visited Church

⁸ Gregory Karotempral, *St. Thomas Christians*, (2002), Vol.13, No.4, 93.

⁹ *Positio*, 'Informatio', 16. For details see Tisserant, C.E., *Eastern Christianity*, 158-160

¹⁰ Tisserant, C.E., *Eastern Christianity*, 134.

everyday and had great aptitude for sacramental life. They practised great devotion to the Holy Eucharist and were ready to walk miles to participate in the Holy Mass. Mariam Thresia belonged to this religious background.

1.4 Socio-Cultural and Economic Life

The social life and customs of the Thomas Christians had been different from time to time, from place to place and from community to community. This is because the immigrations from different places and communities from abroad and from other parts of the country, and conversions from various societies had all substantially added to the diversity in social life and customs. They were Christians by faith, but continued to follow the social customs, diet, ritual practices, caste system etc. of the particular class to which they belonged in the social strata.

The Syrian Christians of Kochi and Travancore had all along been all along a flourishing community. The rulers of the two princely states patronized them. They were numbered among the noble races of Malabar. They were preferred to the Nayers and enjoyed the privileges of being called by no other name than the 'Sons of the Kings.' The Christians were directly under the king, and were not subject to local chiefs. They were very strong and powerful. Their bishops were respected and feared like kings.¹¹ They enjoyed certain social privileges granted by the Kings for their valour, loyalty and military service. They were mainly engaged in agriculture, trade and military service.¹² Syrian Christians were very conservative and attached to their high caste systems. In the public roads those of the inferior castes had to give way to them. For those of the high castes, the touch of the St. Thomas Christians was sufficient to purify articles considered defiled by the contact of the low caste people. The Thomas Christians had the rare privilege to sit before the kings and ride elephants.¹³

1.5 Status of Christian Women

St. Thomas Christians used to maintain joint family system. The father was supreme in the family. The children considered it a sacred duty to help their aged

¹¹ L. K. Anantha Krishna Ayyar, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians*, Ernakulam: (1926), 54-55.

¹² Mathias, Mundadan, *Traditions of St. Thomas Christians*, Bangalore: (Dharmaram College, 1970), 121.

¹³ Placid, Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, Bombay: (St. Paul Publications, 1970), 83-84.

parents who always lived in the family of one of the sons, usually the youngest. ‘The *Makkathayam*’¹⁴ system was in force among the Christians. All sons inherited the father’s property, but the daughters were provided only with a dowry.¹⁵ Women were discriminated and given low status and not given freedom of mobility. Christian women remained at home according to the local customs and engaged themselves in household affairs.¹⁶ In the early days, children - both boys and girls, were sent to *Kalaries*, or *Ezhuthupalis* (non-formal schools) and were taught by *Asan* or *Panikkar* (teacher) both letters and the martial arts. The girls were refused education beyond the primary level after which they were given in marriage. The boys continued their studies even after their marriage.¹⁷ The modesty in dress and behaviour of women was regarded as contributing much to the sanctity and solidity of family life. They seldom went out of their house except to church.

1.6 Puthenchira - the Village of Blessed Mariam Thresia.

In the ecclesiastical map Puthenchira is a village parish, in the diocese of Irinjalakuda. In the political map it is located in Mukundapuram, which is a *Tehesil* of Thrissur district. It is about seven kilometres east of Cranganore (Kodungallore), the famous sea port of ancient India, which however had long been unusable by nature and had yielded place to the harbours of Kochi, Cranganore and Quilon. According to the census of 1991, the village of Puthenchira has an area of 2229.30 kms. and a population of 19804¹⁸. In the ancient days the place was known as Mahodevapattanam. There are legends prevalent still now among the local people about the name of the village which run as follows: When the Perumakals were ruling the region, they constructed in the village a *chira* (barrage) for irrigation. Thenceforth the village was known as Puthenchira (new barrage). Yet another legend has it that the Cheraman Perumal, another local ruler, showing the exact location where the *chira* was to be constructed, by throwing a *puthen* (gold coin). Thus the village came to be known as Puthenchira.¹⁹

¹⁴ In this system, the son inherits from the father.

¹⁵ Scaria Zacharia, (ed). *Rander Prachina Gadyakrithikal*, Changanachery: (1976), 106-107.

¹⁶ Mathias, Mundadan, *Traditions of St. Thomas Christians*, 121.

¹⁷ Andrews Thazath, *The Juridical sources of the Syro Malabar Church*, 30.

¹⁸ N.M.Samual, (Director of census operation Kerala, 1991) *Census of India Series 12*, Trivandrum: (Government press, 1993), 95.

¹⁹ *Souvenir of the Silver Jubilee Celebrations of the Reconstruction and Construction of St. Mary’s Church, Puthenchira* (Malayalam): (1940), 2-3.

Historically, until the 16th c. Puthenchira had been a part of the state of Kochi. Owing to the treaty between the Raja of Kochi and the British, in the 16th c. it became part of a protectorate of the British. In 1762 when Kochi was invaded by the forces of Zamorin of Kozhikode, Kerala Varma, Raja of Kochi sought the help of the Maha Raja of Travancore. The latter sent his Dalava named Ayyappan Marthadam Pillai with an army to help Raja of Kochi. Jointly they defeated the Zamorin in the battle and restored all the lost territory. The Raja of Kochi donated Puthenchira to the Dalava as a token of love and gratitude. However, the Dalava in turn surrendered the village to his Sovereign Rama Varma, the Maha Raja of Travancore. Thus Puthenchira, surrounded by the territory of Kochi, belonged politically to Travancore from 1764 to 1949.²⁰ Because of this Puthenchira had to face many difficulties. Travancore government exacted a huge amount in the form of land revenue from the people. The government never cared for the development of Puthenchira, other than using it as a source of income. Even for primary education, the children had to go to Kochi and other distant places.²¹

Though politically Puthenchira was unfortunate, the Church in Puthenchira occupied an important place in the history of the Church in Kerala. Situated close to Kodungallore, the landing place of the apostle Thomas, Puthenchira is believed to have had Christians from the first century onwards. In the 4th century a Church was built in Puthenchira by the Christians, who had fled persecution in Kodungallore. In the 9th century this church was destroyed in communal riots, and the Christians were scattered to different places. But later some of them came back and settled there and rebuilt the church. In 1502 after the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries, a new church was constructed by Rev. Fr Vincent-a Franciscan Priest from Portuguese²². This Church was used as the Cathedral Church of Kodungallore Archdiocese, where Archbishops and Administrators lived there from 1701 to 1777.²³ The remains of four of these bishops still rest in St. Mary's Church, Puthenchira.²⁴

²⁰ M.K. Devassy IAS. 'The Political History of Puthenchira', *Smaranika, The Souvenir of the Elevation of Puthenchira Church in the dignity of Forane Church* (Malayalam), Thrissur: (1975), 5-8.

²¹ M.K. Devassy 'The Political History of Puthenchira', 8-9.

²² Alappat Devassy Thomas, 'The past history of St. Mary's Forane Church, Puthenchira', *St Mary's Forane Church, Puthenchira Platinum Jubilee Souvenir* (Malayalam), Irinjalakuda: (1991), 4-7.

²³ Placid Podipara, 'Kodungallore Archbishops and their Sees', *Smaranika, The Souvenir of the Elevation of Puthenchira Church in the dignity of Forane Church* (Malayalam), Thrissur: (1975), 15-20.

In 1789 Tippu Sultan of Mysore, attacked Kochi and Travancore and burned the church of Puthenchira. The people about 1000 along with six priests fled, but they later came back and settled there and rebuilt the church. In its place the present church was built in the year 1915 by Rev. Fr. Joseph Vithayathil, the parish priest and the spiritual director of Blessed Mariam Thresia.²⁵

1.7 Chiramel Mankidian Family

The history of Chiramel family traces its Christian origin to the time of the Apostle Thomas.²⁶ The Chiramels constitute a far flung clan of some 500 families, divided into several branches and spread far and wide in the state of Kerala, especially in Ollur, Aranattukara, Pazuvil, etc. in central Kerala. There is ample historical evidence to show that the Chirmels had always been in the forefront of the society and had made remarkable contributions in the educational, commercial and medical fields. In religious matters, too, this premier Christian family of the erstwhile kingdom of Kochi played a prominent role. Of the various branches of Chiramels, our Thresia belonged to Chiramel Mankidian branch, which originated from the Ollur root of the family. Though well-off at first, the Mankidian declined financially and gradually got scattered to various places. Porinchu, the son or grandson of Thomas Mankidian who was settled at Puthenchira, married Ittianm from Thachil Kannai family of Puthenchira, which was also a noble family of good repute and social status. Porinchu and Ittianm were blessed with nine children, seven girls and two boys. The elder boy was named Kunjithoman (Little Thomas) and the younger one Anthony. All the seven girls were married off into noble and wealthy Christian families of high social standing in the districts of Trichur and Ernakulam. The elder boy, Kunjithoman or Thoma, was destined to become the father of Mariam Thresia Mankidian.²⁷

²⁴ The four archbishops buried in St. Mary's Church Puthenchira are: Dom John Riberio S.J. (1701-1769), Dom Antoni Pimentel S.J. (1721-1752), Dom John Alosius Vasconcellos S.J. (1753-1756), Dom Salavador Ros Reis S.J. (1756-1777). See Placid Podippara, 'Kodungallore Archbishops and their Sees', 19-20; Alappat Devassy Thomas 'The past history of St. Mary's Forane Church, Puthenchira', 5-6.

²⁵ Alappat Devassy Thomas, 'The past history of St. Mary's Forane Church, Puthenchira', 6-7.

²⁶ C.O. Paulose, *Chiramel Kudumba Charithram*, (The History of Chiramel Family, Malayalam), Thrissur: (1988), 2.

²⁷ C O. Paulose, *Chiramel Kudumba Charithram*, 81-84.