Chapter II

Early History of St. Thomas Christians

The advent and growth of the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala is a valid living historical tradition. The tradition traces the origin of Christianity in Kerala to the visit of St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ. It has been handed down from ancient time and is accepted by almost all the Syrian Christians of Kerala that St. Thomas landed at the port of Crangannore on the west coast near Cochin in 52 A.D. He preached Christianity first to the Jewish settlers in and around Cochin and then worked among the Hindus. The Apostle is believed to have founded seven and a half churches for the use of the Christian converts and ordained presbyters. The seven churches are those of (i) Malankara (Crangannore) (ii) Palayur (Chavakad) (iii) Parur (iv) Gokamangalam (v) Niranam (vi) Chayyal and (vii) Korakkonikkollam(Quilon) and the half church was at Thiruvankode.\(^1\) Amidst the multitude of controversies regarding the historicity of St. Thomas tradition Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru observed thus: “Christianity came to

\(^1\) Kerala Churithram, Vol.II. Compiled by the Kerala History Association, (Mal.)p.1065
India as early as the first century after Christ long before Europe turned to it and established a firm foothold in South India.²

The St. Thomas tradition is not a mere legend but is founded on facts.³ Churches and relics associated with the Apostle seen in South India are ample testimony to conclude that the Apostle did come to Kerala to make the earliest beginning for the propagation of Christianity. The contacts that existed between the East and the West and the trade routes followed by early merchants on land and by sea is a clear proof that St. Thomas followed the trade route to visit peninsular India. It is believed that St. Thomas having first planted Christianity in Arabia and in the island of Socotra, Sailed eastward and landed at Malankara near Crangancore in the west coast of the southern peninsula. It is further believed that from Malabar St. Thomas proceeded to Mylapore on the Coromandal Coast, where he set up his abode in a rock-cave on the Chinnamalai near the present Chennai city, from where he used to move out for evangelization. During this period the

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apostle is believed to have visited China. However he returned to Chennai and continued his work there. His activities brought him into conflict with local priests. One of these priests caused the death of the Apostle by thrusting a lance into the body of the Apostle. The Apostle succumbed to his injuries three days later. The body was taken to Mylapore, where the Apostle had already built a small chapel, and was buried there.⁴

Among the early converts the family of Pakalomattom occupies a predominant position which had been hailed as the base of Chavara family.⁵ One of the earliest written works about the missionary activities of St. Thomas in India is an apocryphal work known as the acts of (Judas) Thoma support the tradition of St. Thomas as the founder of the Indian Church.⁶

The church founded by St. Thomas began to gather momentum. It traces a continuous history of the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala with certain ups and downs. The materials

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⁶ The Acts is a very ancient work written in 1st or 2nd century in Syriac by an Edessan. The book was soon translated into Greek from the original. Fr. Bernard, *A Brief sketch of the History of St. Thomas Christians*. 

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for the construction of the history of this church during the early centuries of the Christian era are rather limited. History is silent about the infant church in India until it records the name of one Pantaenus. He is believed to have been sent to India in 189 A.D by Demetrius of Alexandria, at the request of certain Indian Christians. He found in India a Gospel of St. Mathew written in Aramaic which he took back with him to Alexandria. His visit to the Malankara church brings into evidence contacts between the Malankara church and the Alexandria church.

The first undisputed piece of evidence on record as to the existence of a church in Kerala is found in the writings of Cosmos. The Knanaya Syrian Christians were led by Knai Thomman, the Syrian merchant from the middle East who arrived at the Malabar coast in 345 A.D. The church founded by the Apostle was reinvigorated by groups of Christians who

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8. Cosmos was a merchant from Alexandria who had sailed in the Indian seas. Hence was called Indicopiestus or the sailor to India.
came from Babylon. In 345 AD, he brought to Crangannore, a group of four hundred Christians from Bagdad, Ninevah and Jerusalem. The St. Thomas Christians and the local Rajah Cheraman Perumal received them. Perumal bestowed upon them several social privileges and lands for settlement. Most of these privileges were not of much intrinsic value, but in a caste ridden society they served to secure an assured status to the Christians. The colonization was the first known instance of a foreign community being introduced into Malabar. It led to the introduction of Syrian Christian community into Malabar. Thereafter the Malabar Christians were called Syrian Christians. Before the coming of Knanaya Christians to Kodungallor, the Christians in Malankara were known not as Syrian Christians but as Mar Thoma Nazranikal. Thomas of Cana and his colonists who lived on the southern side of the river in Crangannore did not freely mix with local Christians who lived on the northern side. The separatist tendency was handed down from generation to generation and even today

they are called Southists while the descendents of the local Christians are called Northists. The Knanaya Syrian Christians gained importance in trade and commerce after the decline of the Roman Empire. They were engaged in the art of shipping and excelled themselves in the commercial transactions. They held the monopoly of the most lucrative commodities like pepper and piece goods. They exported pepper to foreign countries. The ruler of Thekkamkur invited the members of the Knanaya community to Kottayam. Further they established their commercial settlements which were popularly known as angadis, theruvus and compolams. Again about 825 A.D. another immigration under Marwan Sabirso, a Persian merchant landed in Quilon with a large party which included two bishops - Mar Sapro and Mar Prodh. They were warmly received by King Cheraman Perumal. Sabirso built a new church in Quilon and to this church grants were made on two sets of copper plates. During

14 C.V. Cheriyann, op.cit., p.3.
15 P.J. Thomas, Malayala Sahityavum Christianikalum, p.3.
16 E.M. Philip, Malankara Sahbyude Rahasyapedakan, p.2.
17 C.V. Cheriyann, op.cit., p.83.
the period of the grant, permission for conversion to Christianity was given only to those who had real faith in the teachings of Jesus Christ." Among other monuments of the church’s Persian connection may be mentioned a Persian cross with an inscription in Pahlavi language to be found in the Valiya Palli at Kottayam and similar crosses discovered at Kadamattom and Muttuchira. It was in communion with or as part of the Chaldean church that the Malabar church emerges into the light of history. From the very early period the Malabar church established contacts with the church of Persia proper first and then with that of Mesopotamia. It secured its bishops successively from these churches from which it received its East Syriac Liturgy also. Though it was not domination of any type, the Episcopal supervision was provided by bishops from Persia, while local administration of the church was carried out by local priests. Bishop Brown clarifies that while the Malabar church was truly Indian, it depended on the East Syrian churches for its theology, its

19 P. Cherian, op. cit., p. 115.
21 Placid J. Podipara, The Individuality of the Malabar Church, p. 2.
liturgy and its bishops. Though there was Nestorian episcopacy, the orthodox faith was retained. Shut off by the mountains on one side and the sea on the other, the Christians of Malabar lived a life of isolation.

During that period the rulers of Quilon maintained contacts with the rulers of China. Kublai Khan, who was responsible for sending to Quilon in 1292 the Venetian traveller Marco Polo. He speaks of Nestorian Christians in Malabar and mentions the tradition that St. Thomas died in India.

...Christians who have the administration of the church possesses forests and trees that bear the Indian nuts and from them they draw the means of livelihood. As tax they pay monthly to one of the royal brothers (an old English silver coin worth four pence) for each tree...


23. Milne Rae holds the view that the members of the church of Malabar are called Syrians not because they have a Syrian liturgy. They are not of the Syrian nation but of the Syrian rite. The name in this connection is not an ethnological or geographical designation but is purely ecclesiastical. George Milne Rae, Christian college Magazine of September 1890, p.184 cited in T.K. Velu Pillai, Travancore State Manual, Vol. I, p.861. Aramaic was the language of Jesus Christ and his Apostles. Syriac is the dialect of the Aramaic and became the language of the mother church of Persia and it was the sacred language the daughter church in Kerala. S.G. Pothen, The Syrian Christians of Kerala, p.36. Hence the terms Syrian Christians and Syrian Church came into use.

The advent of Marco polo testifies the simultaneous missionary activities of the ‘Pilgrim Society for Christ’ both in China and in Malabar. He visited Mylapore and recorded in his book as follows:

"the body of Blessed St. Thomas lies in the province of Malabar at a certain little town having no great population. Both Christians and Saracens, were, however greatly frequent in the pilgrimage. For the Saracens, also do hold the saint in great reverence and say that he was one of their own Saracens and a great prophet. The Christians who go on pilgrimage to the place where the saint was killed and a portion thereof to any one who is sick of a quartan or tertian fever and by the power of God and St. Thomas the sickman is incontinently cured..."\(^25\)

The Society actively attained its zenith when Pope John XXII by a Bull *Ad perpetum re memoriam* dated August 9, 1329 constituted Quilon as an Episcopal See.\(^26\) It was the first diocese in the Indies and at the time the only one in the country


\(^{26}\) *Monumenta Vaticana*, Veterem Deocesim Columbensem, p. 9.
with the Dominican Friar Jordan Catalain of Serverac (France) as its Bishop. The rare honour was conferred upon Quilon to be the first ever Catholic diocese of India, a decade after the death of Ravi Varma Kulasekhara (1299-1313). In his letter dated August 21, 1329 appointing Jorden Catalain Pope John stated thus:

"John servant of the servants of God to our venerable Friar Jordan Cathala Bishop of Coulun, greeting: considering that you... Learned in the science of theology have personally known of the state the situation of the people (of India) in the course of our preaching to them the Divine word and that you have now the souls of many faithful to our Lord Jesus, for whom the zeal for the Holy Faith is a proof of sanctity (cui sacrae religionis zelus vitae mundatio est) we have in consequence, caused, to be given to you episcopal consecration by the hand of our venerable Brother Bertrand Bishop of Tuscalum. Wherefore, by these present apostolic letters, we order your Fraternity that

27 Ibid. p 11.
you repair to your church with the grace of our benediction.”

Another Franciscan, Friar Odoric of Pordenone visited Kerala about A.D. 1324 on his way to China. He halted at the port of Quilon for a while. After his return to Europe some years later he dictated an account of his impressions of Christians in Malabar and the Coromandel coast. He says that there were Christians at Quilon. He points out also that it was ten days journey from Malabar to another part of India where St. Thomas the Apostle was buried and that “his church is filled with idols and beside it are some fifteen houses of Nestorians that is to say Christians, but vile and pestilent”

In 1348 John de Maringoli, a Franciscan on his return journey from China arrived at Quilon. He was sent to India, China and other Eastern countries by Pope Benedict XII (1334-1342). He spent several months in the country. In Quilon alone he remained for sixteen months. At that time, there were

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28 C. V. Cherian, *op. cit.*, p.124
two distinct Christian communities in India one following the Syro-Chaldean rite and the other adhering to the Latin community. He has left behind him an account of his stay in Quilon as follows:

On Palm Sunday 1348 we arrived at a very noble city of India called Quilon, where the whole world’s pepper is produced. The Christians of St. Thomas are the masters of the public weighing office (qui habent stateram ponderis totius mundi) from which I derived as a prerequisite of my office as Pope’s Legate every month a hundred gold fanams and a thousand when I left. There is a church of St. George there of the Latin communion, at which I dwelt and I adorned it with fine paintings and taught there the Holy Law. And after I had been there some time I went beyond the glory of Alexander the great when he set up this column. For erected a stone as my landmark and memorial and anointed it with oil. In sooth it was a marble pillar with a stone cross on it, intended to last till the world’s end. And it had Pope’s arms and my own engraved on it with inscriptions both
in Indian and Latin characters. I consecrated and blessed it in the presence of an infinite multitude of people and I was carried on the shoulders of the chief’s in a litter or Palanquin like Solomon’s. So after a year and four months I took leave of the brethren (valesfaciens fratribus)*. He preached the word of God and conducted divine services. He also baptized a pagan after instructing him for three months. It must be admitted that cordial relations prevailed at that time between the Latinites and Chaldeo-Syrians. The terms cited above are sufficient enough to substantiate it ....

Another papal Legate to India whom mention can be made of is Friar Albert de Sartiano O.F.M sent by Pope Eugene IV (1431-1447) to the Asiatic countries. He was the bearer of a letter sent by the Pope to the Villarvetttam ruler of Kerala. Addressing the Chaldeo-Syrian ruler as “Beloved son of Christ, Thomas, the illustrious Emperor of the Indians”, the letter, recommended the Papal Legate top? the ruler and said: “There has often reached us a constant rumour that your serenity and

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all who are subjects of your kingdom are true Christians."31 In 1433 Pope Eugene IV sent several missionaries to the Eastern countries and Frair Albert de Sartiano was one among them.32 Fr. Hosten states that such types of settlements were found from Karachi to Cape Comorin and from Cape Comorin to Mylapore.33

When the Portuguese under Alfonso de Albuquerque landed in Quilon in 1503 they found that there were 25,000 Christians of whom a good number were Latin Catholics. The historian who accompanied Vasco da Gama during his second expedition also visited Quilon and referred to the existence of numerous churches.34

The accounts furnished by the European travelers shed immense light on the conditions of the church in Malabar from the 12th to the 15th centuries. Among the travelers were John of Monte Carvino, who remained in India for thirteen months; Marco Polo, the celebrated Venetian traveler, who stayed in India on his way back to Rome from China and Oderic, an

31. Panjikaran, *The Syrian Church in Malabar*, p.34.
Italian Franciscan, who on his journey to Quilon and Mylaprooe found several families of Nestorians here. John De Marignolli, who stayed at Quilon for sixteen months speaks of Indian Christians as masters of South India.

Till the arrival of the Portuguese, the Christian church in Kerala remained an independent body. It was Christian in religion, Syro-oriental in worship and Indian in culture. Until the 16th century, there were neither doctrinal nor ritual division among the St. Thomas Christians. They had the same faith and same communion and had also the same rite which was East Syrian. Thus they were well placed in the social hierarchy when the Portuguese set their foot on the coast of Kerala. George Woodcock, attested to it as follows:

In general, the Syrian Christians were unmolested by the non-Christians of Kerala. At a later period Tipu Sultan destroyed some Christian churches in Malabar and made a few forcible conversions to Islam, but he was an alien from Mysore, unaccustomed to Malayali tradition of tolerance. The only known persecution by Hindus was

the massacre in 1809 of many Syrian Christians, including some priests, during a Nair rising against the East India Company, but this was less because of the religion of the victims than because they were suspected of favoring the British. There is certainly no record of any persecution, on the part of the rulers of the Brahmins during the period before the arrival of the Portuguese. 

During the course of these centuries, the St. Thomas Christians became an affluent community. They enjoyed the same social status on par with the caste Hindus and observed their caste rules as their own. They were indifferent to the spread of gospel and their spiritual life was on the wane. They maintained ecclesiastical relations with the Persian church, welcoming bishops and ecclesiastic from the region. But the church never came under the domination of the Nestorian church. The Syrian church developed itself as an indigenous church except in matters of faith and forms of worship. The Christian society of Kerala presented the picture of a

their religion unconsciously emulated the fanaticism of the Moslems, and when persuasion and eloquence failed, they used intimidation and force to convert the Syrians to their faith.\textsuperscript{41} It was the first organized move of one set of Christians against their own kith and kin in this part of the world.\textsuperscript{42} One hundred and fifty two priests and six hundred and sixty two laymen and Archdeacon attended the synod, which commenced on 20 June 1599. Two hundred and sixty seven decrees were passed at the synod.\textsuperscript{43} They were calculated to establish the Roman doctrine and Pope's supremacy in clear terms. The celibacy of the clergy was made a rule. The Udayamperoor sunnahadose took decisions calculated to wean the Christians away from the centuries old Hindu influence.\textsuperscript{44} The Synod of Diamper, to a great extent brought to completion the Catholicization of the church in Malabar.\textsuperscript{45} The Portuguese efforts to create a pocket of influence by winning over the local Christians to allegiance towards the Roman Church also left behind a trail of communal

\textsuperscript{41} C. M. Augur, \textit{Church History of Travancore} p.22.
\textsuperscript{43} C. M. Augur, \textit{op. cit.}, pp.48-50.
\textsuperscript{44} M. G. S. Narayanan, \textit{Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala}, p.7.
feuds and bitterness.\textsuperscript{46} The synod touched the very foundation of the religious and social life of the St. Thomas Christians.\textsuperscript{47} The allegiance lasted only for fifty five years. The unwilling Syrians vindicated their ancient faith by requesting the Patriarch of Egypt at Cairo, the Nestorian Patriarch of Babylon and the Jacobite Patriarch at Antioch for a bishop to be sent to Malabar. In the meanwhile, they nominated one among themselves named Thomas of the Pakalomattom family, to act as their bishop till one would arrive. The response came immediately from the Patriarch of Babylon who sent Bishop Ignatius Simon Hidayathulla popularly known as Ahatalla to Malabar. But the Portuguese, out of hostility to the Syrian Christians, deported him to Goa where he was tried by the Inquisition and then burnt or shipped off to Europe. The success of the Synod was short lived.

The Ahatalla event brought the discontent which had been brewing to an open revolt even against the Government on whose strength the church depended for its existence.\textsuperscript{48} A

\textsuperscript{46} M.G.S. Narayanan, \textit{op. cit.}, p.8.
\textsuperscript{47} Xavier Kudapuzha, \textit{op. cit.}, p.110.
\textsuperscript{48} K.K. Kuruvilla, \textit{A History of the Mar Thomas Church and its Doctrines}, p.11.
large number of about 25,000 Syrian Christians marched to Cochin under the leadership of Anjilimoottil Thomman Cathanar. 49 But the fort was closed against them and cannon were mounted on the walls for use in case of emergency. Hence they assembled around coonen cross, at Mattancherry, Cochin and touching the long rope that was tied to it, took an oath that they severed their connection with the Roman church and that they would recognize their Archdeacon Thomas as the supreme head of the church. As the news of the coonen cross oath spread, all the Syrians except a few hundreds joined the revolt. The event marked a turning point in the history of Kerala church as it led to the emergence of two distinct sections among Christians, the Romo-Syrians who remained loyal to the Pope known as pazhayakuttu (old section) and other section who got liberation from the Roman yoke called as puthenkuttu (new section). 50 The general council of the puthenkuttu met at Alangad, elected a four member committee to assist the Archdeacons 51 attempt to bring the revolting

49  C. Achyutha Menon, Cochin State Manual, p.220.
51  Ittip Pukadiyil, Suriyin Sashtra Charitram, p.117.
Syrians again into the Roman fold met with partial success. The capture of Cochin by the Dutch on 7 January 1663 completely changed the situation.\textsuperscript{52} The new masters ordered all Roman ecclesiastics out of their territory and the Syrian clergy and their following were left unmolested on condition that they would pay no allegiance to the Portuguese king.\textsuperscript{53} The fortunes of the church were much affected by the changing of politics of the country.\textsuperscript{54} In the course of trials and tribulations the Syrians mustered further strength to restore their lost status.

The rise of the Dutch in India enabled the St. Thomas Christians to revive their contacts with the Eastern churches.\textsuperscript{55} It enabled the St. Thomas Christians to seek the good offices of Eastern non-Roman churches and this time the Jacobites came to their aid.\textsuperscript{56} The bishop, the Jacobite Patriarch sent was Mar Gregorios, Bishop of Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{57} One of his first acts was to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} M.O. Koshy, \textit{The Dutch Power in Kerala 1729-1758}, p.19.
\item \textsuperscript{53} L.K. Anantakrishna Iyer, \textit{Anthropology of the Syrian Christians}, p.33.
\item \textsuperscript{54} A.M. Mundadan, \textit{op.cit.}, p.84.
\item \textsuperscript{55} M.O. Koshy, \textit{op.cit.}, p.213
\item \textsuperscript{56} Jacobites belonged to the group of churches historically called Monophysite and their patriarch was known as the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch.
\item \textsuperscript{57} V.C. Samuel, \textit{Ithu Oru Indian Sabha}, p.88.
\end{itemize}
consecrate Archdeacon Thomas as Mar Thoma I. It marked the beginning of the long connection between the two churches. Episcopal continuity was restored with Mar Thoma 1 as the first Indian Metropolitan. His successors were known by the name Mar Thoma up to Mar Thoma V and thereafter four of the Metropolitans were known by the title Dionysius. Some of these consecrations were conducted by visiting bishops from the West Asia as before and some by the local Metropolitans. During the eighteen centuries of its existence in Kerala Christianity developed as an indigenous religion. It became possible under the patronage extended by the local rulers and with the friendship and tolerance extended by the natives. Although the Portuguese could destroy the liturgy of the Syrians and create a division among them, they could not completely destroy the community.

Under the Dutch and the British East India Companies the Syrian Christians sincerely tried to strengthen their status. With their support, the Syrian Church revived its religious, educational and social activities. Claudius Buchanan who

visited the Malabar Church at the instance of Lord Wellesley prepared his report in the famous document known as *Christian Researches in Asia*. Col. John Monroe, the British resident of Travancore and Cochin states from 1810 to 1820, took a further initiative. He was a devoted Christian with evangelical convictions. Col. John Monroe who took keen interest in the social and religious renovation of the St. Thomas Community, wrote to the Church Missionary Society of England to send missionaries to revive the Old Church. The Anglican Church Missionary Society sponsored the ‘Mission of Help’ to the Orthodox Church established in 1816. The first missionary to arrive was Norton. Benjamin Baily, Joseph Fenn and Henry Baker, the first triumvirate of English missionaries to the Syrian Church of South India, followed him. They were to regenerate the St. Thomas church. They were not to make Syrians Anglicans or assume authority over them, but to bring new ideas which would work from within and help the Syrian

church to reform itself. Being conscious of the needs of his church, Punnathara Mar Dionysius, the Metran, welcomed the Church Missionary Society missionaries to work in the St. Thomas church. At first the native Metrans welcomed the cooperation of the missionaries but later on a hostile spirit was manifested towards them. The rapid spread of protestant beliefs among the Syrian Christians led to the Synod of Mavelikara which decided to stop all connection with the Anglican missionaries.

Besides the Romo-Syrian church and Jacobite Syrian church, there were some minor churches tracing their origin to the Apostle Thomas. The Chaldean or Nestorian church, which is still following Syrian liturgy has considerable historical importance. It maintained connection with the church of Babylon even during the middle ages. The Chaldean Church also known as The Church of the East has developed in and around Trichur. At present the Church is under the episcopal supervision of Mar Aprem and Paulose Mar Paulose.

The Thozhiyoor Suriyani Sabha is an independent Syrian Church. The origin of the church goes back to the 18th century, when a foreign Jacobite bishop by name Mar Gregorius consecrated a priest, belonging to Kattumangattu family, as Bishop with the title Mar Kurilos, without consulting the reigning Metran, Mar Thoma VI. This led to dispute between Mar Thoma VI and Mar Kurilos. Mar Thoma VI appealed to the Rajas of Travancore and Cochin. Fearing persecution, Mar Kurilos escaped to a place called Thozhiyoor or Anjur in British Malabar. He gathered some followers there and the church founded by him became an independent one. The church had played a significant role in critical stages in the history of the Syrian church by consecrating bishops for it. There is a strong relation between the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and Thozhiyoor church since 1893. When Thomas Mar Athanasius died in 1893, his successor was consecrated by Mar Athanasius and Mar Kurilose V of the Thozhiyoor church.

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Ever since bishops of two churches help each other for interchurch consecration of bishops.

The Roman Catholic Church established its roots in Malabar with the advent of the Portuguese in the 16th century. The St. Thomas Christians maintained contacts with the eastern churches of Persia through centuries. But they maintained their special identity and status. Though the Portuguese tried their best to force them to accept papal supremacy, a large number of them resisted. They struggled hard to keep their identity against the Portuguese domination. It was only with the expulsion of the Portuguese, the St. Thomas Christians were able to renew their contacts with the eastern churches. The St. Thomas Christians had the full support of the Dutch. When the British became a dominant political power in India, they tried to reform the church of the St. Thomas Christians. Though all the major political developments affected their lives, society and religious practices, they remained Indian, retaining their special characteristic features. The St. Thomas Christians had a rightful place in the society and shared common interests and took pride with the rest of the people of Kerala that they were
all ‘Malayalees’ speaking the same Malayalam language and wearing the same dress. They were staunch in their adherence to their faith and proud of the apostolic origin of their church. The majority of the Syrian Christians in Kerala belong to the Roman Catholic Church.