INTRODUCTION

In the early centuries of the Christian era, the East Syrian Christians in Asian continent mounted global ventures in missionary expansion that the other churches including Western and Asian churches could not match until the thirteenth century. ‘Asian churches’ refers to the churches that grew and spread outside the Roman empire in ancient oriental kingdoms, east of the Euphrates and stretching along the old Silk Road from Osrhoene and the Red Sea around Arabia to India.

Following in the footsteps of the apostles and evangelists, who contributed to the growth of the Christian faith, East Syrian Christians carried the Christian message across Roman Asia and Persia, towards Arabia and central Asia. One of the most important and fascinating aspects of the life of the East Syrian church was its missionary dynamism. There was Christian influence through the missionary works of Christian doctors, scribes and artisans who were readily able to find an employment among the communities of the countries, in which they worked. Thus the whole life of the Christian community was permeated with missionary spirit. The clergy or the laity, the traders or the refugees, wherever they went, became the ambassadors of Christ among the people who did not know about Jesus Christ. The East Syrian Christianity strengthened its relationship with the Asian Churches mainly through their missionary enterprises. During the early centuries, the East Syrian Church exercised ecclesiastical authority over more of the earth when compared with other churches in Rome and Constantinople. The Christian faith responded creatively to Indian, Turkish, or Chinese culture in contextual writing and witness. By tracing the history of the East Syrian missions to India and China during these centuries, we can see that the missionaries took an active part in the political, cultural and economic infrastructure of these countries. Along the way, the history of the Christian movement has continued to give rise to new articulations of belief, new forms of worship, new institutional strategies and new practices of faith.
The East Syrian missionary enterprises, probably from the fourth century onwards, helped the survival and growth of Christianity in South India. The emigration of groups of East Syrian Christians or individuals to different parts of India, especially South India, reinforced and strengthened the existing St. Thomas Christian community in India. In this process of migration, and cultural exchange, each tradition gave and received major influences, both in encounter with each other and with diverse local cultures. The commercial success of the Christians gave them a high position in the society. At this stage the faith of the 'Thomas Christians' in India began to be enriched with some East Syrian Christian elements. The Indian society, religion and culture also benefited due to the work of the East Syrian missionary enterprises.

But it is one of the ironies of history that Christianity, which was born in Asia, has become alien in its place of birth. Asian Christians have remained so long in Asia without being a part of the historical process in Asia and hence they lost their sense of identity, mission and creativity. The attempt here is to find out the role played by the East Syrian missions to shape the socio-religious and cultural life of the Asian continent in general, and Indian society in particular, through an enquiry into the historical survey of the East Syrian missionary works in Asia. The primary as well as the secondary sources of the East Syrian missionary enterprises have been surveyed and they made the subject of the research.

The study of the subject during this period seems to be difficult due to lack of clear documentary evidence. There are scanty and fragmentary materials available to reconstruct the whole subject, which lie shrouded in legends, fables, fictions and confusing details. Since the Indian history as well as Indian Christian history lacks clarity in the early centuries, it makes the compilation of the pre-Portuguese history a difficult task.

This work, 'The East Syrian Missions to Asia with special reference to The Malabar Coast from sixth century to sixteenth century AD and its influence on Indian Religions, Society and Culture' is divided into four parts namely (i) The East Syrian
Church Formation: Major Events and Features During the Early Centuries, (ii) Missionary Enterprises: New Beginnings and New Challenges (600 AD to 1600 AD), (iii) The Origin of Indian Church and its Background and (iv) The Impact of East Syrian Missionary Enterprises in Asia and Malabar Church.

The first part is treated under six chapters broadly based on an account of the milieu of the early Syriac Christianity, its growth and development in the Parthian and Sassanian era towards a primate, the tribulations the East Syrian Church had to face through the persecutions and controversies and its blossoming in the Asiatic continent through the missionary movement. In the first chapter titled the milieu of nascent Syriac Christianity, the gestation and nascent period of the East Syrian Church is discussed. In the second chapter, an outline of the nature of the East Syrian Church during the early centuries is described. The intermittent persecutions meted out at the hands of Parthian emperors and its several aggravated forms at the hands the Sassanians are explained in the third chapter. The organizational development of the East Syrian Church during the early centuries is evaluated in the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter deals with the theological controversies, which emanated within Christianity itself on the questions of the interpretation of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The activities and the contributions of the monastic movement are of great significance to the East Syrian Church. The educational institutions started by the monasteries and their literary contributions are dealt with in the sixth chapter of the first part.

The second part - ‘New Beginnings and New Challenges’ - deals with the missionary zeal of the East Syrian Church which reached out to Central Asia, China, Mongols, India and even to the North - East Asia, South and South-East Asia. The first chapter narrates the development of the East Syrian Church in the entire Persian region. Evidences of missionary efforts of the East Syrian Church emanate from the period of the Tang Dynasty in China during 618-907 AD and factors of the decline of Christianity in China are discussed in the second chapter. The missionary zeal of East Syrian Church could find greener pastures to sow the seeds of Christianity in Central
Asia, which is dealt with in the third chapter. The history of the East Syrian Church in the region during the 13th and 14th centuries was the history of the three great Mongol emperors, which is revealed in the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter concentrates on the rest of the Asian continent excluding the Middle East, Central Asia and India up to the 16th century. Christianity enjoyed patronage under the rulers and that paved way for the introduction, growth and development of Christian missionary enterprises. The coincidence of the opening of trade routes into further Asia with the ascendancy of the East Syrian Church offered a ready outlet for missionary effort. The East Syrian Christians, especially Persian, Indian and Chinese missionaries and traders, who were strongly influenced by missionary motivation, seized this opportunity in different parts of Asia before the arrival of western missionaries.

The third part 'The Origin of Indian Church and its Background' is the subject matter of the study. The first chapter is an attempt to unveil the history of the origin of the Indian Christianity, by compiling facts and traditions relating to the early centuries. In the second chapter and in the third chapter the apostolate of St. Thomas in India and the relationship between the Indian church and the East Syrian Church are discussed respectively.

The fourth part deals with 'The Impact of East Syrian Missionary Enterprises in Asia and in Malabar Church'. In the first chapter 'Impact of East Syrian Missions in Asian Continent in general' is discussed. The second chapter is devoted to the 'Impact of East Syrian missionaries in India with special reference to Malabar Coast'.

The intent of this study is to find out whether the instructions of the East Syrian Church missionaries had any bearing on the local people, which created Christian pockets in different regions of Asian Continent and how far the East Syrian Church had been successful in transmitting to various regions, cultural heritage, philosophical insight, knowledge of science, medicine, art and architecture and above all the Christian message.  

(xvi)