

The Jacobite Syrian Church in India

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Introduction : Here an attempt is made to introduce the Jacobite Syrian Church for those who seek the briefest account about the church. It is in no way an easy task to present the eventful, complicated and immense history of the Jacobite Syrian church in a concise form. During the course of history the church faced enormous challenges trials and tribulations. But here only the most important aspects connected to the history, faith and traditions of the church are dealt with.

1. The universal Syrian Orthodox Church

The Jacobite Syrian Church in India functions as an integral part of the Universal Syrian Orthodox church. Therefore it is necessary to deal briefly about the Universal Church at first.

a. The importance of the Throne of Antioch

When in AD 325 the first Universal Synod of the Christian Church was convened in Nicea the whole Christendom in the world came under the existing three patriarchates or patriarchal thrones—namely Rome, Alexandria and Antioch. We will try to trace back the importance of the Throne of Antioch. Though the Christian Church had its origin in Jerusalem under leadership of St. Peter it faced severe persecution there (Acts 11:19). In AD 37 St. Peter and other leaders of the church therefore migrated to Antioch in order to give efficient leadership and to widen the missionary activities of the church. Antioch thus became the most important centre of 1st century Christian church. In history the Christian believers were for the first time called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26). St. Paul the greatest missionary of the church also choose Antioch as the centre and from there he organized all his missionary journeys. When in AD 70 the Romans destroyed Jerusalem the majority of the Christians fled to Antioch. In the first century Antioch was the capital of the Roman province of Syria and it was a beautiful cosmopolitan city. In the 1st century AD only one church in the world possessed all the qualities and attributes of a Universal church and that was the church in Antioch. The Syrian Orthodox Christians consider themselves as descendants of this 1st century church of Antioch and therefore they cannot think of a cessation of the relation with Antioch.

b. Importance of the Patriarch of Antioch

The Syrian Orthodox Church believes that St. Peter came to Antioch in AD 37 and from there he gave leadership to whole church. Therefore St. Peter is considered as the first Patriarch of the Apostolic throne of Antioch. All the duly consecrated legitimate Patriarchs after St. Peter till now are honoured as successors of St. Peter. This faith in Petrine succession has far reaching consequence and crucial importance in determining the faith, tradition and unity of the Syrian Orthodox Church. St. Peter was according to NT the leader of the apostles witness to the resurrected Christ and shepherded appointed by the resurrected Christ to lead in whole church. Therefore divine grace and blessings are handed down from God the Father through the son Jesus Christ at first to Peter from Peter to his successors the Patriarchs, from Patriarchs to the Metropolitans from Metropolitans to the priests and from priests to the common believers. Thus in the Syrian Orthodox Church the Patriarch as successor of St. Peter represents the first and the foremost link in respect of Apostolic succession and divine priesthood.

2. The founder of the Church:

The Christian faith reached India in the 1st century AD itself, when St. Thomas landed in Kodungallour (Kranganore) by ship in AD 52. He preached the Gospel, established a few parishes and also ordained priests and thus the Christian church was established here. There is a misunderstanding that Christian faith reached India through the European missionaries. During his second visit to India, St. Thomas became a martyr and was buried in Mylapore in the State of Tamilnadu. In the 4th century (on 3rd July) his relics were taken to Edessa with the permission of the Patriarch of Antioch. The Christians in Kerala celebrate St. Thomas day on 3rd July every year.

3. History of inseparable relation with the throne of Antioch

Till the 1st Universal Synod of Nicea in AD 325 the churches in different parts of the world were functioning independently without much mutual relation. After the Synod all the Christians came under the supreme authority of either of the three Patriarchates of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch. Accordingly all the eastern churches came under the Patriarchal throne of Antioch. A Persian bishop called Yuhanon (John) represented India and put his signature in the Nicean Synod (AD 325). In AD 345, 20 years after the Nicean Synod a group of Syrian Christians led by bishop Joseph and a merchant called Knai Thomas reached Malankara (Kerala). The Christians in Malankara received them with great Joy and accepted the faith and traditions of the Syrian Church. Afterwards

the Christians in Malankara began to be called as “Syrians”. The transfer of the relics of St. Thomas from Malankara to Edessa in 394 through the permission of the Patriarch of Antioch shows the supremacy of the Patriarch over Malankara. In the historical accounts on the Alexandrian Patriarchs written by Isidoros in the 7th century, it is mentioned that the Indian Christians were ruled by the Patriarch of Antioch. Another important evidence of the relation with the throne of Antioch is 2nd Syrian migration in 822 AD. Two saintly bishops Mor Shabore and Mor Aphrot reached malankara and gave leadership to the church. The Jacobite Syrian Church honour them and in the ancient church in Akaprambu their memory is celebrated every year. A syriac document kept in the Cambridge University proves that the Syrian Christians in Malankara in 12th century were under the Patriarch of Antioch and observed Syrian Orthodox faith and traditions. This situation continued till the end of the 15th century.

4. Period of Nestorian Presence in Malankara

In the early middle age and also later the Nestorian church conducted vast missionary activities in India and China. Their presence in Malankara is proved in the years from AD 1490 to 1599. The Syrian Christians in Malankara were not aware of the differences in faith and traditions of the Nestorian and Syrian Orthodox Churches. With an open heart they received all the Christian visitors from outside.

Therefore during this period the Syrian Orthodox and the Nestorian churches existed side by side in Malankara. When the portuguese came they experienced the strong presence of the Nestorian Church in Malankara.

5. Period of Roman Catholic Domination.

The Portuguese people were conservative Latin Catholics and they considered all other Christians outside the Latin Church as heretics. Therefore when they came they decide to convert all the Christians in Malankara to Latin Catholic church. For that purpose the Roman Catholic Arch Bishop Menezis convened the historical synod of Diamper on 20h June 1599. After the Synod there began brutal and in human latinization process in Malankara Church. The Malankara Church had to suffer servitude and indignities under the Portuguese and under the Latin Catholic church. An example of their brutality was the order given to the Syrian Jacobite Priests to divorce their wives. Because of severe persecution the leader of the Malankara Church Archdeacon Thomas appealed the throne of Antioch to sent Bishops and the Patriarch sent Mor Ahattulla in 1653. Mor Ahathulla didn't appear in Malankara and

news spread that he was caught by the Portuguese, tied him up and thrown in the ocean.

6. Oath of Coonan Cross and the restoration of relation with the throne of Antioch

The news of assassination of Mor Athalla spread in Malankara and the Jacobite Syrian Christians were very much provoked by the above news. This led to the famous Oath of Coonan Cross at Mattanchery on 3rd Makaram 1653. In the Oath the decision was taken to end all relations with the Roman Catholic church and to resist latinisation. The Malankara church sent requests to the Patriarch of Antioch again and in 1665 Mor Gregorios Abdul Jaleel of Jarusalem was deputed to Malankara. The link with the throne of Antioch was reestablished with the arrival of Mor Gregorios. He consecrated Arch Deacon Thomas as bishop with the title Mor Thoma I. The Church was purified putting aside all the latin and Nestorian influences and adopting fully the Syrian Orthodox faith traditions and practices. From that time onwards till today the Jacobite Syrian church functions as an integral part of Universal Syrian Orthodox church under the Patriarchal throne of Antioch.

7. The Syriac Language

Aramaic was the mother tongue of our lord Jesus Christ his mother and his disciples. In the middle of 2nd century the Syriac language began to develop in Edessa as an off-shoot or as an improved version of Aramaic. The Syrian Christians can claim that their liturgical language is the language spoken by Jesus Christ and his disciples. Therefore they can be really proud of their language. The Theological schools in Edessa and Nissibis were great centres of Syriac language and literature in early centuries. In the field of research in the manuscripts of the Bible, the Syriac holds a unique position, The Syriac Bible called "Pshitho" is the official Bible of the Syrian Christians.

8. Faith and Traditions

The faith and traditions and worship of the Jacobite Syrian Church are similar to those observed by Universal Syrian Orthodox church. They include faith in the trinity, Jesus as the incarnation of the son of God, holy cross, the church, the Holy Bible as the word of God, The Validity of the unwritten traditions together with the Bible, the creed of Nicea, the observation of seven sacraments intercession to St. Mary and to other saints, rites after death and prayer for the departed daily payers, lent, fasting, celebration of the Holy Eucharist on Sundays and other sacred days church consecration, the three stages of priesthood, and the apostolic

succession from St. Peter through the Holy throne of Antioch veneration of the relics of saints and approval of the first three ecumenical synods namely Nicea (AD 325), Constantinople (AD 381) and Ephesus (AD 431).

9. Theological Seminary

The Jacobite Syrian Church in India has a major Theological Seminary with all modern facilities. The Seminary gives theological education and priestly formation for all the candidates for priesthood. For every apostolic church seminary is the most important institution and functions as the brain of the church. The ecumenical secretariat is also functioning in the Seminary. The Seminary has got a publication wing and all the liturgical books of the church are published from the Seminary. The Seminary is the treasure house that keeps and protects the faith and traditions of the church. The Seminary is developing step by step and gradually it will become a centre for study and research. The Seminary is now planning to construct an international Institute for Study and research in Syriac language and Patrimony.

10. Missionary and Charitable Work

In the Jacobite Syrian Church there are a few missionary organization for the propagation of the Gospel and to help the poor and the needy. The Evangelistic Association of the East, St. Paul's Mission, St. Paul's Prayer fellowship, St. John's Mission etc. are missionary organizations. The missionaries go to the undeveloped remote areas where there is no water, electricity and roads and they render help to those destitute people. There are also several orphanages, destitute homes, homes for mentally retarded and mentally disordered people. In order to preach the gospel a convention is conducted in national level during 26 to 31 December every year in Puthencruz.

11. Spiritual Organizations of the church.

In the Jacobite Syrian church at present there are five main spiritual organizations: 1) Clerical Association: It is an association of the priests and it function mainly in diocesan level. 2) Sunday School Association : It is the largest spiritual organization of the church intended to given religious education. Every parish church has a unit of the Sunday School and thus about 600 Sunday schools are affiliated to the Association. 3) Youth Association: It is a spiritual organization aiming at the Spiritual growth and welfare of the youth of the church. Youth is organized in parish levels, in diocesan levels and also in whole Malankara level. 4) Women's Association : The Jacobite Syrian Christian Marthamariam Vanitha Samajam is an Association of women. It also functions in parish, - diocesan and whole Malankara levels. 5) Students Movement : It

is intended to organize the students studying in different colleges and to give them spiritual orientation.

12. Ecumenical Relations: the Jacobite Syrian church is far ahead in ecumenical relations with other churches. The theological dialogue between Catholic Church and Jacobite Syrian church is going on producing positive results. The church has active participation with ecumenical bodies like WCC, CCA, NCCI, KCC, ECC, TLC, SEERI etc. There is an ecumenical secretariat to promote Ecumenism.

13. Structure and Statistics : The first Spiritual Supreme authority of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church is the Patriarch OF Antioch and All the East. The second supreme spiritual authority and the head of the Jacobite Syrian Church in India is His Beatitude the Catholicose. Under the Catholicose there are 33 bishops working as diocesan bishops and as heads of other organizations of the church. The church has 1.2 million believers in 20 dioceses in and outside India

Conclusion:

St. Thomas one of apostles of Jesus Christ founded the Church in India in the 1st century itself. After the 1st Ecumenical Synod of Nicea in the 4th century the church came under the Patriarchal throne of Antioch. Through direct and indirect contacts with Antioch and through Syrian Christian migration to South India the church adopted the Syrian Orthodox faith and traditions and became part of the Syrian Orthodox Church. During the past 2000 years the church passed through severe persecutions, divisions, trials and tribulations. But overcoming all the obstacles the Jacobite Syrian church exists strongly and steadfastly upholding the age – old sacred faith and traditions of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church and also as the remnant of the 1st century apostolic church of Antioch.
