



A SYNOPSIS OF THE HISTORY OF THE SYRAIN CHURCH IN MALABAR

By A Syrian Catholic, Kottayam.

Printed and Published by K.V. Varghese at the V.G. Press, 1910.

In 345 A.D. a Syrian Christian Colony came to Malabar from the East, under the leadership of a rich Aramean merchant named Thomas Cana of Jerusalem, who traded from the Persian Gulf down to this Coast and settled at Cranganore. The Colony was gathered from Bagdad, Nineveh and Jerusalem. They numbered four hundred Christians in seventy-two families, among whom were some priests and deacons and a bishop named Joseph of Edessa. They introduced here the Syrian liturgy, hence forward all Christians in Malabar adopted the same Syrian liturgy entitled Sacrum Beatorum Apostolorum; and so they are called even today Syrian Christians. The Malabar Church henceforward was especially protected even by heathen kings of Malabar from whom Thomas Cana obtained many honours and royal privileges for the Christians. (vide "Travancore State Manal II. p. 138).

Some writers think that St. Thomas the Apostle brought the Syrian liturgy into India. To verify this assertion, two conditions must be supposed; i.e. the Apostles ought to have had a determination to observe everywhere the liturgy in the Syriac, or the people of India ought to have known the Syriac. But it is clear that neither of these hypothesis can be proved. Because the ablest liturgical writers and linguists hold that in the days of the Apostles Mass was celebrated in the language that prevailed in those places where the Apostles went to spread the light of the Gospel; and the Syriac was unknown to the people of India. A recent writer (F.C.J. "A short life of St. Thomas the Apostle of India" Madras 1906-pp-52-53) says:- "They (Indians) went on for a century or more worshiping in their own churches with a simple Dravidian liturgy and their own local priests. But gradually the Persian Christians who traded in those parts substituted their own liturgical formularies for the Dravidian liturgy, explaining that Syriac was the language of our Lord himself, and that St. Thomas himself framed their own liturgy in his own language the Syriac. The Madras churches readily yielded to these introductions but the Malabar church took some time. Meanwhile priests began to come from Persia and become incumbents of the churches. By 500 A.D., both sides of the Peninsula lost their Dravidian liturgy."

The Syrian Christians in Malabar are also even today called Nazarani-Mapilas, or St. Thomas' Christians. The appellation Nazarani, was given to the primitive Christians in the early centuries. It originated from the derision of the Jews who called the Christians Nazarani, as Jesus was from Nazareth and called 'Nazarene'. The Syrian Christians are also called Mapilas. The term Mapila is a compound Malayalam word Maha (great) and Pilla (son) hence it means Prince or Royal sons, which are the honorary titles granted to Thomas Cana and his followers by Cheraman Perumal, Emperor of Malabar. The Syrian Christian priests are entitled Cathanars, which is also an abbreviated form of the Malayalam words Carthran Governor and Nathar (Lord) i.e. governing lord of the Parish. The Syrian Christian Bishops are entitled Abuna and Mar. The term Abuna in Syriac means our Father and Mar means my Lord, which are titles of respect corresponding to Dominus in Latin, Monsigneur in French and Italian, Dom in Portuguese and Spanish. The Syrian Christians attach the title Mar to the names of Popes, Angels and Saints also; ex. gr. Mar Papa or Mar Pios Papa, Mar Michael. Mar Joseph, etc. (vide The Madras Catholic Directory for the year 1910. page 204-5-6-7).