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MARTH MARIAM BIG CHURCH (VALIAPALLY) AT TRICHUR

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ABSTRACT

The Marth Mariam Big Church is the Headquarters of the Assyrian Church of the East in India. It is an ancient church founded by the Apostle St. Thomas. The Assyrian Church is flourishing even today. There are 30,000 members in India mainly in Thrissur and Kerala. There are 400,000 members throughout the world. We are learning about this ancient church which even our forefathers did not know. Now His Grace Dr. Mar Aprem heads the Church in India.

His Grace Dr. Mar Aprem is the Patriarchal Vicar and Metropolitan of India. He is the former President of the Church History Association of India from 1976 to 1982. He was ordained as a Priest in 1965. Since 1968, he was ordained as Metropolitan by Mar Thoma Darmo. He earned his Doctor of Theology degree from Serampore University.

KEYWORDS: Big Church, St. Thomas, Christian, Catholics, Theology, St. Thomas Mount, Steamer, Metropolitan

INTRODUCTION

The British people and the Portuguese thought that they brought Christianity to India. However, we in India came to know that Christians came in the first

Century A.D. St. Thomas, an Apostle of Lord Jesus converted the Namboodiri Brahmins of Kerala to Christianity in 52 A.D. St. Thomas said to the Brahmins, "When you throw water it comes back but when I throw, it will not come back". It went like flowers to heaven. Then they became Christians. St. Thomas is famously referred as Doubting Thomas. He spread the Gospel and teachings of Lord Jesus Christ to India.

The famous hill in Chennai is known as St. Thomas Mount where he hid from Poojaris and where he was killed in 72 A.D is named after him. It is located near the Chennai International Airport. The remains of

St. Thomas are kept at San Thome Cathedral at Mylapore. St. Thomas preached in India for 20 years. Now there is a Church on St. Thomas Mount.

In the year 1814 A.D, the Marth Mariam Big Church was built at Thrissur in Kerala for the Chaldean Syrians to worship. There were 52 Christian families brought by Shakthan Thampuran, ruler of Cochin State for the progress of Commerce in Cochin in 1796 A.D.

In 1815, Abraham Kathanar¹ dedicated this Church by the Command of Sri Kerala Varma Maharaja of Cochin. There are two traditions regarding the founding of this Church, known as Valiapally. It was dedicated to the Virgin Mary. This Church was formerly known as the Church of Our Lady of Dolours or Vykula



Mathavin Pally in Malayalam. Now it is known as Marth Mariam Big Church or Valiapally. The first service was held on March 18, 1815. This Church building was completed in 1814.

Joseph Cor-Episcopa

He was a Latin Bishop. He ruled this Church from 1830 to 1849 A.D. He succeeded Abraham Kathanar. He too had an unsuccessful administration. He got a communication letter from Nicholas Elia VIII, the Chaldean Patriarch of Babylon at Mosul. This letter was lost long ago.

Denha Beriona

Joseph Cor-Episcopa's successor was Denha Beriona. He was a Syriac Priest. He came to Bombay and then to Cochin. He ruled the Church for eleven years from 1849 to 1860 A.D. It was said that he was a priest (for the fear) of the Latin group.

The main contribution of Denha Beriona was to take Father Antony Thondanat to Mosul.

Mar Thoma Rocos

In 1860, Chaldean Patriarch Mar Joseph Audo VI went to Rome to get permission to consecrate a Bishop for India. Rome refused to give permission. He then decided to consecrate a Chaldean priest Thomas Rocos² and send him to India. Mar Thoma Rocos² was secretly consecrated and sent to India. He was the first Metropolitan to come to India.

Mar Thoma Rocos served for one year from 1861 to 1862. Though he served only one year, he made an impact on the Trichur Church. He was welcomed with great enthusiasm in the Big Church and all the neighbouring Churches. He brought with him a book in Syriac called Khudra copied in 1598 A.D. He presented it was a valid manuscript. It contains more than 1000 pages. He stayed at Malabar for only one year 1861-62.³ The Khudra is kept at the Church Library. This book was produced later as an evidence in a Court case to establish the faith and worship of this Church at that time.

Mar Thoma Rocos stayed only for a short while in Trichur, concentrating his activities in Travancore than in Cochin. During his time in India, Mar Thoma Rocos faced strong opposition from the Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly. Mgr. Bernardina Barcinelli, Titular Archbishop of Pharasala.⁴ In March 1862, Fr. Antony Thondanat along with a deacon and Thomas Srampickal got into the steamer in which Rocos was returning. At 4.00 p.m, Rocos got out of the room and rushed to the steamer. Some Catholics took his baggage and placed them in the boat.

Mar Abdisho Thondanat

Meanwhile Fr. Antony Thondanat requested Patriarch Audo to consecrate him as bishop for Malabar. The Patriarch did not oblige. Then he went to the Nestorian (Assyrian) Patriarch Mar Ruwill Shimun XX at Qudshanis in the mountains of Kurdistan. Mar Ruwill Shimun consecrated him as Mar Abdisho Thondanat, Metropolitan of Malabar and India. He served for two terms in the Church first from 1862 to 1874 and later from 1882 to 1900 A.D. A letter⁵ from Mar Ruwill Shimun in Qudshanis, addressed to the members of the Church in Malabar written in 1862 A.D. confirms the fact. According to this letter, he consecrated Mar Abdisho Thondanat as Metropolitan of Malabar and India as requested by the congregation to get a Metropolitan for them. When Mar Abdisho returned to India, he faced opposition from the Roman Catholics. He later became Vicar of Vilakunadom. He was forced to renounce his office under duress.

Mar Elia Johannes Mellus

Mar Elia Johannes Mellus was the head of the church from 1874 to 1882 A.D. He was from Mardin, Turkey. He was a learned man and a very strong person. Patriarch Mar Audo sent him as his personal representative to the 18th century celebrations in honour of St. Peter & Paul in Rome. Elia Mellus had the privilege of attending the 1st Vatican Council in Rome along with Mar Audo and six other Chaldean Bishops⁶ Mar Mellus left India and reached Basra on April 13^t 1882. He was assigned the See of Mardin in Turkey where he died

on February 16, 1908.

Return of Mar Abdisho Thondanat

Mar Abdisho Thondanat has lost a civil suit for the church at Elamtthotkam near Palai, so he was forced to shift his residence to Big Church Trichur in 1897. During his second reign from 1882 to 1900 a Cor-Episcopa called Michael Augustine played an important part in the church at Trichur. Mar Abdisho Thondanat died in his room on 16th of November 1900 A.D. He was buried inside the altar of Marth Mariam Big church. The Cor - Episcopa Michael Augustine ruled for 8 years till 1908. He died in 1911 A.D.

Mar Abimalek Timotheus

An important milestone in the history of the Big Church was the arrival of Mar Abimalek Timotheus, Metropolitan of Malabar and India. He was born in the village of Beesho now in Iran. His father was a Khasisha. He was consecrated and sent by his friend, Patriarch Mar Benjamin Shimun XXI. The revival of this church in the 20th Century was without doubt due to his untiring effort and sacrifices he made to save the remnant of this Church of the East. He established the Mar Narsai Printing Press to print Syriac and Aramaic materials. He spent his life for the establishment of the church of the east and for the revival of everything noble and flourishing in India. Because of His Grace Mar Timotheus's tireless efforts and hard work and self-sacrifice, the Big Church continues to be beacon of the Church of the East in India.

During his tenure, several churches were built in and around Trichur. The first church constructed was Mar Yohannan Mandhana⁷ Church at East Fort Gate in Trichur.

This church became the control church for this area. This church was constructed under Episcopal supervision unlike Valiapally. Later Mar Adhai Church, Mar Aprem Church, Mar Geevargis Church, Mar Kuriakose Sahda Church, Mar Mari Sleeha Church and Esthapanose Church were built in a around Thrissur. One Church St. Thomas Church was built at Ernakulam two years after his death. In 1927, the Metropolitan's Palace was built next to the Big Church. He established a bank Chaldean Syrian Bank for the financial development of this community. He ordained several batches of clergymen. He learnt Malayalam and wrote books in Malayalam.

Mar Timotheus took part in the freedom struggle. He hosted Jawaharlal Nehru, his wife Kamala and daughter Indira in 1931. He also met Mahatma Gandhi in 1934. He was truly a man of God. He had divine healing power. People of every religion used to come to him for Prayers. He died on Palm Sunday, April 30th 1945. Even now people of all religions come to his tomb. May 1st a memorial lunch is held in his honour. The City Council named the main road as Mar Timotheus Road of the Church is named Mar Timotheus Road. Many buildings were named after him.

After his demise there was no Metropolitan or Bishop for seven years from 1945 to 1952. Rev. Poulouse Konikkara was elected Administrator of the Church. He died in 1949. The Church suffered from the lack of leadership. The Patriarch could not find a Bishop to visit or serve the Indian Church.

Mar Thoma Darmo.

The Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII looked for a replacement for Mar Timotheus. He ordained Deacon Mansur Elisha Darmo⁸ as Mar Thoma Darmo as the Metropolitan of Malabar and India at Mar Adhai Church at Turlock, California, U.S.A. He arrived at Trichur on 22nd June 1952. He was given a grand welcome by the Church. He brought peace between two factions of church members during the seven years without a Metropolitan. He did a lot of service to the Marth Mariam Big Church.

Mar Thomas Darmo ordained five Priests and seven deacons in 1954. He ordained six more batches. He constructed a seminary which was the cherished dream of mar Timotheus. He was given a reception by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as a successor of the great Mar Abimalek Timotheus. A Malpan⁹ Kaku Lazar was brought to teach Syriac from Baghdad in 1955.

Mar Thoma Darmo built a seminary on a 52 acre cashew plantation. The clergymen were paid from the central funds. He built personages¹⁰ in each of the seven churches in the church premises. He built the Mar Timotheus Memorial Orphanage. The greatest achievement of Mar Thoma Darmo's literary career was the

printing of three volumes of the Khudra, which had a total of 4000 pages. It took six years. He proof read and edited the entire book. He got financial support from church members and friends. He translated books from liturgical Syriac to modern Syriac for the use of people of his homeland. He founded the Assyrian Youth Federation. He organized the Mahila Samajam and he founded 'Voice of the East'. It has Indian and Foreign edition. He sent his clergy to different theological seminaries so that they can teach at the seminary. He also had a missionary zeal. He was interested in countries near India - China & Japan. One of his major achievement was uniting the church which was divided. But, towards the end he himself played a major part by dividing the church and causing schism¹¹ in the church.

The 3rd Assembly of the World Council of Churches held at New Delhi in 1961, Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun came India to attend it. His Holiness Mar Shimun visited the Big Church in January 1962. It is unfortunate that Mar Darmo had to face litigation and law suits. He also had severe health problems.

Mar Shimun suspended him on January 10, 1964. Mar Shimun adopted the Gregorian calendar but Mar Darmo continued with the old Julian calendar. This split made it difficult to continue his development work. Much money was wasted for law suits. His health was also affected. His heart's desire was to build a church at Madras (now Chennai), the city of martyrdom of St. Thomas in 72 A.D. On 13th December 1964, Mar Thomas Darmo laid the foundation stone for the first church outside Kerala State in recent history. However, he could not see the fulfillment of his dream. But as suggested by Mar Darmo, Mar Aprem, Metropolitan built it and consecrated the Mar Qardagh Sahda Church on December 27, 1970.

Mar Darmo controlled most of the churches in India. The rift with Mar Shimun against hereditary succession did more harm than good to the church of the East.

Fortunately, now the church is re-united and hereditary succession is abolished and he left India for Baghdad, Iraq in September 1968. He consecrated two Indian Priests, Rev. K.A. Paul as Mar Poulouse Episcopa and Rev. George Mookan as Mar Aprem Episcopa. Eight days Later, Mar Aprem was raised to the rank of Metropolitan. On the 10th October 1968, Mar Thoma Darmo was consecrated as Patriarch of the Old Calendar Group at Mar Zaiya Cathedral in Baghdad, Iraq against the New Calendar Group headed by Mar Eshai Shimun. The Old Calendar Group is known Ancient Church of the East and the New Calendar Group is known as Assyrian Church of the East. He ruled till his death of 7th September 1969. His services to the Indian Church are invaluable. Many Churches were given by the Iraqi Government to the Mar Thoma Darmo group.

Mar Aprem and Mar Poulouse

Mar Poulouse went to Berkeley, California, U.S.A while Mar Aprem returned to India after a stay of 40 days in Iraq. Mar Adhai was made Patriarch of the Mar Thoma Darmo Group in 1972. Mar Aprem took charge of Valiapally and Mar Poulouse joined him in 1976.

Mar Eshai Shimun consecrated Mr. C. C. Timothy as Mar Timotheus for his faction of the Church as Metropolitan. Mar Darmo's faction had the charge of Valiapally and the school and a number of churches around Trichur.

Mar Aprem was active in the Church since his Sunday School days. In 1957, he joined Leonard Theological Seminary, Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh. He finished the B.D.¹² Course when he was only 21 years old. He won a scholarship from World Council of Churches. He holds two masters degrees in Church History. He was a candidate for Doctor of Theology at Princeton Seminary, U.S.A when he was made a Bishop and elevated as Metropolitan eight days later in September 1968. Later, he earned his Doctor of Theology degree from Serampore University near Calcutta. He is a great scholar and prolific writes. He wrote over 100 books mainly in English and Malayalam. He was the President of the Church History Association of India. He is a composer of devotional songs. His song Behold the Cross of Calvary was translated into 100 languages. He is a linguist.

He founded the Mar Timotheus Birth Centenary Technical Training Centre in 1986. Mar Aprem has a collection of rare Syriac manuscripts in Eastern Syriac. He toils hard in guiding this Church. The progress the Big Church has made in not only upholding the faith and tradition of this Church, but in all areas concerning the Church is the result of his tireless service and self sacrifice. He campaigns against the misuse of alcohol and he distributes rice to the poor.

After the untimely death of Mar Poulouse in March 1998, Mar Aprem had to carry the administration by himself.

Mar Poulouse was born in 1941. He had the calling to be a servant of God even at the age of 12. He could recite and sing in Syriac very well. He was made a deacon in 1958 and a Priest in 1965. In 1962-63, he attended Serampore Bible College and took B.D. He was a great reader and orator and used to win prizes in his undergraduate years. He joined San Francisco Theological Seminary at the University of Berkeley, California and received his vision. He also spoke at atheist meetings about Lord Jesus Christ.

Mar Poulouse was respected by people of all walks of life including Communists like E.M.S Nambudiripad who was the first Chief Minister of Kerala. He played a great role in re-uniting the Church in November 1995. His untimely death during a bye-pass surgery at Apollo Hospitals in Chennai in March 24 1998 and it was an irreparable loss to the Churches in Kerala. He was a great problem solver.

Mar Timotheus

Mar Timotheus guided the New Calendar Group at a most critical time in the history of the Church when there was schism. He was a dedicated member of the Church. He was a Sunday school teacher for 12 years. He studied under Kaku Lazar. He was consecrated by Mar Eshai Shimun in 1971. He met the Indian President Giani Zail Singh on October 25th 1983. He was instrumental in the Unity of the Church. He died in August 2001.

CONCLUSION

The 14th Holy Synod was held at Thrissur in January 2010. Two young Bishops were consecrated. Mar Yohanan Yosip and Mar Awgin Kuriakose. Mar Aprem heads the Church in India and U.A.E and Oman. Mar Dhinka IV died in 2015 and Mar Geevargis Sliwa is elected the Patriarch. He presently resides in Iraq.

END NOTES

1. Abraham Kathanar was the Archdeacon of the Chaldean Syrians. Mar Aprem, Indian Church History Lectures, Mar Narsai Press, Trichur, 2007, pp.37-38. Kathanar means Pastor.
2. Mar Thoma Rocos arrived in India on May 9, 1861, Mar Aprem, Indian Church History Lectures, Mar Narsai Press, Thrissur, 2007, pp.42 – 44.
3. The exact date of the Trichur Church Judgement is March 1862.
4. He was the Apostolic of Verapoly from 1855 to 1868 A.D.
5. This letter is the Staticon of Mar Abdisho.
6. Donald Attwater was a Roman Catholic writer who stated that even Nestorian Bishops were inevitable to attend the Vatican Council. Donald Attwater, The Christian Churches of the East, Vol.II. The Churches not in communication with Rome, Milwaukee. The Bruce Publishing Company, revised edition, 1962, p.173.
7. Mar Yohannanan Mamdhana is the Syriac word for St. John the Baptist.
8. He was ordained as a Deacon in 1921 by Mar Timotheus, Mar Aprem, Mar Thoma Darmo, MarNarsai Press, Thrissur, 1974, pp.6-7.
9. Malpan Means Teacher. Mar Aprem, Strange But True, Maryland Printers and Publications, Trivandrum, 1981.
10. Parsonages are houses where the priests stay.
11. Schism means dividing or causing a split in the church. Moran Etho, Church of the East in the 20th Century, SEERI Kottayam, 2003, pp.177-187.
12. Bachelor of Divinity.

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- 6.Rev. Lijo Raphael, Vicar, Mar Timotheus Church, Bangalore.
- 7.Mr. Rajan Isaac.

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