

TRADITIONS AND CULTURE OF ST. THOMAS CHRISTIANS IN PRE – MODERN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

The tradition traces the origin of Christianity in Kerala to the visit of St. Thomas, one of the 12 Apostles of Jesus Christ. He preached Christianity first to the Jewish settlers in an around Cochin and then worked among the Hindus. The present article examines some of the traditions, rituals and social life among the Christians. Through this article the author throw light on the traditions and rituals of the Nazrani Christians in pre- modern Kerala.

Key Words:

Christianity, rituals, Jewish, Nazrani, Apostle etc.

Introduction

St. Thomas Christians are a community of Christians from Kerala, India. They are also called “Syrian Christians” or “Nasrani”. Nasrani is a term with the meaning Christian. It appears to be derived from Nazarath, the home town of Jesus. They are known as “Nazranis” because they are the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. The group is called Syrian Christians because of their use of Syriac in their liturgy. They speak Malayalam, the language of Kerala.

Christianity in Kerala

Before the arrival of Portuguese missionaries, Christianity strack its roots deep in the soil of the land. From the very beginning Christianity developed here through the evangelistic activity of St. Thomas the Apostle. People from all sections of society embraced the new religion. The tradition holds the idea that the ancestors of St. Thomas Christians are from the high castes of the Hindu society. They were converted by the Apostle St. Thomas, who landed in India in 52 A.D.

According to the tradition, Christianity in Kerala was founded by St. Thomas the Apostle, at Maliankara near Cranganore (Kodungallur) in 52 A.D. The modern Malayalom balled “Thomas Ramban Pattu” (The song of the Thomas), gives precise details of the activity of the Apostles and dates his arrival to the month of Dhanu (December 52 AD) and his death in Mylapore in 72 AD on the 3rd day of the month of Karkadakom (July).

The Apostle converted several Brahmin families and founded seven churches. The first century churches established by St. Thomas are Maliankara (Kodungallur), Palayur, Kottakavu (North Paravur), Kokkamangalam (Pallipuram), Niranam, Chayal and Kollam (Quilon).

Socio Religious life of St. Thomas Christians

When the Portuguese landed at Calicut, Christians in Kerala were spread over the whole of the territory of Kerala. They were known as Nazrani Mapilas or noble Christiansⁱ. They had been granted many privileges by different local rulers such as to ride elephants, use palanquins and roofed gates, sit before kings on carpets use day lamps etc. These privileges were given written on copper plates. These copper plates grants shows their high rank in societyⁱⁱ. The four important copper plates are those of Thomas of Cana, Iravikorthan and two Quilon plates.

Until the arrival of the Portuguese, the Christian church in Kerala was an entirely independent body. During this period, churches played an important role in the life of the Christians. Churches externally looked like Hindu temples with the difference that the churches carried a cross on the roof. There was also a cross in front of the church. The churches had separate doors for men and women.

The administration of the church was carried on by the assembly (Yogam) of the Parishoners consisting of all adult males and local priests. The assembly (Yogam) decided over the cases of public scandal among their subjects and gave punishments. Civil case was decided by Bishops and Archdeacons. In some places, the criminal cases were taken to kings. But it was not popular among Malabar Christians.

The Syrian Christians had a practice of fasting to prepare themselves for special occasions. The main fasts of the Syrian Christians were 24 days fast before Christmas, 3 days of fast, a fortnight before the great lent, in commemoration of Jona's fasting in the belly of the whale, the great lent of 49 days before easter, and 14 days fast before the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Besides, there was fasting on ordinary Fridays and Wednesdays. On days of fast they refrained from eating egg, fish, meat, milk and abstained from wine and marital relations. On these days they usually won't conduct marriages.

The Syrian Christians were a highly civilized people and their main occupation were agriculture and commerce. They controlled the pepper trade industry. The ruler of Venad granted Syrian Christians 72 rights and privileges, those which are usually granted only to high dignitaries, including exemption from important duties, Sale Tax and Slave Tax. Syrian Christians were mainly a wealthy group and it was mostly through agriculture and trade. Also, St. Thomas Christians were excellent soldiers and warriors. They were very loyal to their kings and fought for kingsⁱⁱⁱ.

Traditions and Rituals

During the early period the Christians were Hindu converts. They continued to follow the social organization and life style before the conversion and thus there was no social dislocation between the Christians and Hindu Community. Christians shared with the Hindus very many of the social customs and practices. In course of time, some Hindu traditions has also become an integral part of Christian rituals. Milk boiling ceremony that take place during the blessing of a newly built house, the groom tying a golden jewellery called "Minnu" around brides neck during the marriage ceremony and the yearly celebration of Sradham feast commemorating the death of a relative are some among them.

St. Thomas Christians have adopted many rites of the Hindus in family life. The food of the Christians was boiled rice and vegetable curries. They never ate pork. A newborn child was fed with powdered gold mixed with honey immediately after its birth. When the child becomes eleven months old, child will be given boiled rice to eat. Men and women would not sit and eat together. Wives would not address their husbands addressing them by their names. They cultivated charity, love and affection in the families^{iv}.

Syrian Christians led a simple and modest life. Their dress was similar to that of other people in Kerala. Men wore dhothi and woman wore a loose jacket which covered the hands and the body to the waist, and a long piece of cloth reaching to the ankles and was tied round the waist. When going to the church the women would cover their head with a big veil. Women wore different types of ornaments like motiram, Kammal, mala, vala, tala, aranjnam etc. Child marriage was the usual custom and the parents normally choose the partners. Marriage was usually celebrated in the presence of a priest^v.

Conclusion

St. Thomas Christians are a unique community of Christians in Kerala. They are the oldest order of Christianity in India and thus shared many social customs in common with their Hindu neighbours. They keep their Indian social customs and other practices relating to birth, marriage and death. They are Indian in culture, Christian in faith and oriental in worship.

References:

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