



# BRITISH RESIDENTS AND THE SYRIAN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN KERALA (1800- 1836)

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## *Abstract:*

The primary objective of this study is to find out how Col.Macualay and Col. Munroe, the British Residents of Travancore steered the spiritual and temporal life of the native Syrian Christians. They tried to make some fundamental changes in religious and social life of the native Christians so as to reform the community. It helped the Malankara Christian to come out from many of their social bondages and transform itself as an agent for social transitions in modern Kerala.

## *Keywords:*

Syrian Christians, Malankara, Marthoma, Metropolitan, Reformation, Synod.

## *Introduction*

Though the Syrian Christians in Kerala remained as an indigenous religious community they had close contact with many foreign churches. Since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, envoys of the European Churches frequently visited India. They found native Christian communities in different areas who were differed to them in faith and practices. The Portuguese and British tried to interfere with the life and faith of the Christian community by using their political supremacy so as to craft a community which was always expected to be loyal to their political power and faith. A significant chapter in the history of Malankara Church was opened with the historical Synod of Diampore in 1599 convened by the Portuguese. Afterwards, the Portuguese exercised both administrative and spiritual control over the native church. However, a strong group of Syrian Christians strived to retain their freedom. By the Coonan Cross Oath in 1653 they denounced their allegiance to Roman Church and subsequently known as the Malankara Syrian Church. Arrival and intervention of the British Residents and missionaries in Travancore, the former princely state in Kerala again made far reaching effects in the socio-religious life of the Malankara Syrian Christians.

## British Relations

There was a political turmoil during the time of Mar Dionysius (1765-1809), the sixth Mar Thoma of the Malankara Church. Travancore and Cochin came under the control of the British. Colonel Macaulay took the charge of the Resident in Travancore in 1800. In 1806, Richard Kerr, the Senior Chaplain of the Madras government visited Malankara Church and drafted a report. He reported that the Malankara Syrian Christians were in between 70000 -80000 in numbers. They were mostly cultivators and artisans, living entirely inland, attentive to their religious duties and to their clergy, respected by the Rajah and the Nairs. (C.B.Firth 166). Claudius Buchanan, a CMS missionary visited Travancore and Cochin during 1806-1807 and was asked to submit an inquiry report by Lord Wellesley on the history, tradition, and condition of the Malankara Syrian Christians. (P.Churian 71) In 1808, *Vattippanam*, an endowment was deposited at British East India Company by the Metropolitan. It was deposited at the rate of 8% interest per year and had a provision to give the interest to Metropolitan every year.

Buchanan made discussions with the Travancore ruler and further visited parishes in different areas. He found that the Syrian Christians had only limited copies of the Bible. (P.Churian 68). He realised that only the educated priests could read the Bible in Syriac language and the majority was not able to read or understand it. Buchanan started efforts to translate Bible into Malayalam. The translation of the New Testament was completed in 1808 and printing was completed in 1811. (Thampi 84-87) This translated Bible is known as the Ramban Bible. As per the agreement between the Metropolitan and Buchanan, clergies of both the Anglican and Malankara churches were permitted to conduct services and speeches in other's parishes. (Secretary 35-36) Their efforts helped to create a spiritual revivalism amongst the Syrian Christians and laid the foundation for further relationships.

Col. Munroe, the successor of Col. Macaulay as the Resident of Travancore (1811-1815) appointed a commission in 1813 to study the condition of the Syrian Christians in Malankara. After realizing the deplorable condition of the Christians such as illiteracy, spiritual degradation, unemployment, poverty, etc. he wrote a letter to the Madras government seeking the permission to remove these injustices. He used his authority to rectify their political grievances. They were exempted from certain taxes and other forced duties to Hindu temples that had been required of them, and some of them were appointed as judges and other posts in the public services. (P.Churian 85-88)

The Syrian Christians acquired respectability in society during the period of Munro. They secured immense privileges. They were permitted to ride and travel on elephants, a privilege monopolised by the king and the Brahmins. Munro stood for the socio-political advancement of Syrian Christians and expected that they would be able to stand on their feet. This could be achieved only by means of education at the right time, providing facilities for the circulation of the Bible, wiping out superstitious practices, freeing them from the civil disabilities and improving their social status by them admitting into the government service. (Nellimukal 149-151) . He influenced Rani Parvathy Bhai, the Travancore ruler to grant the converted Christians the right to occupy family properties. He supported Ittoop Ramban of Kunnamkulam to establish a Seminary at Kottayam in 1813. The Travancore government granted 16 acres of tax free land for establishing the seminary. (P.Churian 85-88) Munroe also gave Rs. 3360, the interest of *Vattippanam* for four years to Pulikkottil Ramban for the construction of the Seminary. Its works were completed in 1815. But the Madras government had discontent in giving interest of *Vattippanam* to a non-bishop because it was

against the agreement between the British government and Mar Thoma VII. To overcome the crisis, Mar Philoxinos of Thozhiyoor Church consecrated Pulikottil Ramban by the name Pulikkottil Mar Dionysius on March 20, 1816 as per the direction of Colonel Munroe. (S. E. Mathew 160) By the efforts of Munroe, Rani Parvathy Bhai, ruler of Travancore issued a Royal Declaration which made Mar Dionysius as the Malankara Metropolitan.

Munroe invited CMS missionaries to seminary so as to provide better education and training to the clergy. Munroe's interest in Syrian Christians induced Rani Lakshmi Bhai to grant land, money, building materials, etc. to them regularly. She also donated a sum of Rs.8000 for constructing a new church, when the existing church was burnt by some people. Rani Lakshmi Bhai donated Rs.21200 to the C.M.S. Seminary at Kottayam. The government also made a gift of a large- landed estate of about two thousand acres in extent near Kallada in Quilon, which was renamed as Munroe Island or *Munroe Thurthu*, for the purposes of the seminary. During the tenure of Munroe, both Rani Lakshmi Bhai and Rani Parvathy Bhai considered the Syrian Christians with great concern and offered many grants. Munroe took up more than 200 Syrian Christians into government services and some of them were placed in the high ranks like judges. (G. Mathew 29) Besides, Munro took steps to avoid the social disabilities suffered by the converted Christians. He ended the practice of forced labour of Christians to government even on Sundays, and compulsory contribution to temples and its festivals. He gave Rs.100/- per month for each priest involved in the translation of the Bible. (T.P.Abraham 295) The lower caste women who were converted to Christianity were given the right to cover their bosoms. Munro issued an order which amicably settled the problems on inheritance of property among the converts to Syrian Christianity.

As per the request by Munroe and Buchanan, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) sent their 'Mission of Help' to Malankara and Thomas Norton arrived here as their first missionary in May 1816. On 25 November 1816, Pulikkottil Mar Dionysius passed away without consecrating a successor. In 1817, Mar Philoxinoise of Thozhiyoor Church consecrated Punnathra Mar Dionysius as desired by Munroe. In 1816-17, three notable missionaries, Benjamin Bailey, Joseph Fenn and Henry Baker came to Kerala. They engaged in different tasks like visiting parishes, teaching and preaching Bible, educating clergy, etc. Benjamin Bailey translated and published the New Testament and the whole Bible in Malayalam in 1829 and 1841 respectively. Joseph Fenn, the principal of the Old Seminary took charge of imparting education and training to the clergy. Henry Baker started an English School at Kottayam and many village schools in different parts of the state. (Secretary 35-36) Their 'Mission of Help' was able to create a spiritual effect amongst the Syrian Christians within a short time. Punnathra Mar Dionysius convened a meeting of the representatives of parishes south to Kottayam at Mavelikkara on 3 December, 1818 and it selected a six member Reformation Committee. (T.P.Abraham 229)

The friendly relation between the Malankara Church and the English missionaries did not last long. During the initial years, there was a mutual trust and co-operation between them. Gradually tensions formed between them. In 1825, Punnathra Mar Dionysius passed away and the Missionaries wanted to consecrate Adangapurathu Ouseph Kathanar as the new Metropolitan. But the meeting held at Pallikkara Church was in favour of Cheppad Mar Dionysius. It was against to the will of the British missionaries. (S. E. Mathew 165-166). Meanwhile Fenn, Baily and Baker returned to England and the new missionaries Joseph Peet, Tucker and Woodcock arrived here. They were not able to make good relations with the Metropolitan. They were rather

impatient about the slow progress of reformation being made and started arguments over the faith and practices of the Syrian Christians.

In 1835, Daniel Wilson, Bishop of Calcutta visited Travancore and presented some proposals to resolve the issues. For discussing the matter Metropolitan summoned a synod at Mavelikkara on January 16, 1836. It decided not to accept certain proposals of reformation of the church by the missionaries and decided to end the two decades' relationship with them. (J. Marthoma 40-41) Though it saved the church from Anglicanisation it closed the door for any kind of change in the church. It asserted the supremacy of the Antiochian Patriarch on Malankara and banned all activities of the missionaries in Malankara Church. Syrian Christian students were withdrawn from seminaries and even from the missionary schools. The clergies and the laity in general were notified that all persons associating with the Missionaries would be ex-communicated. (P.Churian 248) In spite of the threat of excommunication some Syrians cooperated with the missionaries.

Thereafter both parties indulged in conflicts over the possession of wealth, properties, institutions etc. So Colonel Fraiser, the British Resident of Travancore and Madras government jointly formed an Arbitration Board. By the decision of the board, the properties were divided between the Malankara Church and the missionaries. (A. Marthoma 22) Then the missionaries focused outside the Malankara Church particularly among the depressed classes in Travancore. Many people particularly the lower castes in Travancore embraced Christianity in the following years. Some of the Syrian Christians and priests also joined with the missionaries. Congregations and parishes were formed at different places. Subsequently in 1878, Travancore - Cochin Diocese, a branch of the Church of England came into being with Kottayam as its headquarters. (J. Marthoma 42) But there was a small group in the Malankara church led by Palakunnathu Abraham Malpan strongly stood for reformation initiated by the missionaries and their efforts ultimately resulted in the evolution of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church, the first reformed church in Asia.

## *Conclusion*

The British residents and missionaries in Travancore made many efforts to improve the spiritual and social life of the Malankara Syrian Christians. They removed many social disabilities on the Christians in Travancore. Their activities like setting up of seminaries and churches, translation of Bible, evangelisation of the lower castes, regular Bible studies, financial support to clergies and parishes etc. enabled the Syrian Christians to improve their social status and positions in the society. A large number of lower caste people were converted to Christianity through the work of the missionaries. But their activities created some issues in the existing Malankara Church and formation of new Christian denominations in Kerala including both the Syrian Christians and the new believers. Moreover, their efforts ultimately led to the reformation in the Malankara Church and the evolution of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church.

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