

THE CHURCHES OF ST THOMAS CHRISTIANS OF KERALA

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Fig.1. All Saints Church, Udyamperoor. The Synod of Diamper was held in this church

ABSTRACT : This article attempts to contextualize the historical background of architectural development of the Churches of St Thomas Christians of Kerala. It also gives a brief introduction of various architectural features such as retable, altar, Piazza crosses etc of these Churches. Through this article I attempt to present how architecture also becomes a mean to represent identities.

KEYWORDS : St Thomas Christians, Syrian Christians, St Thomas, Churches, Architecture, Retable, Stone Crosses, Murals.

Introduction

Architecture is considered to be as a register of human history; it is seen as architectural evidence or as a statement made by a certain individual or a particular community. According to B. H Hume, "a building's design is an indication of the value of the particular society which has brought into being..... Architecture depends not only for its forms, but for its very existence upon the organization and conduct of society as a whole." So, in that way it becomes both a statement and a proof of existence.

Even apart from as a statement it also acts as an evidence of intermixing of various cultures. Church architecture evolved from the domestic architecture. Christianity as religion is established on the congregation of people. Thus the 'Last Supper' becomes an important event and it is re-enacted even today when a holy mass is celebrated. In early Christianity, domestic architecture was also used as congregative space, where people must have meet together in the commonality of their faith. One of the earliest surviving examples of Christian architecture is the third century A. D. structure adjoined with a house in Duro - Europos in Syria. Duro - Europos was major trade centre which lay on the border of the Roman and Persian Empire. As being

in the border it was constantly conquered by both the Roman and Persians, thus having both the qualities. Even there is ruin of a fourth century structure in Jubail, Saudi Arabia which is said to be belonging to the Church of East.

This article presents a brief introduction into the Churches of St Thomas Christians, an indigenous Christian community in Kerala whose history goes as far as to the beginning of early Christianity itself.

A Very Brief History of St Thomas Christians

Kerala ports were gateways to world, several culture came through this gateway and become an integral part of Kerala. Its spices added flavor to the world cuisines. This made identity of pepper and Kerala almost interchangeable. The Western Coast of Indian Sub continent was an active trade route of which Kerala was also an active participant. This participation also allowed interaction of cultures, and it was one such interaction that introduced St Thomas Christians /Syrian Christians to Kerala.

When one looks at the history of Christianity, it is misconception that the Christianity was a Western or European religion. The Great Schism of Christian Church into the Catholic and Orthodox included several sub sections of Christianity. To a certain extent this division was visible on geographical lines with Catholic Church centered on Rome and Orthodox included several sub sections which questioned the authority of Rome as the center of Christian world. The Orthodox fold included Greek Orthodox, Coptic, Ethiopian, Assyriyan Church of East etc. It was from the Assyriyan Church of East that the St Thomas Christians of Kerala received communion until the arrival of European or the Catholic Christianity.

According to the local myths, it is believed that St Thomas the apostle came to Kerala in A.D. 52 and converted few families here; hence they are known as St Thomas Christians. Though it is doubtful whether St Thomas has ever been to Kerala, but one cannot deny the presence of Christian community there from early centuries onward. They used Syriac language, which was a dialect of Middle Aramaic as their liturgical language; it was because of this they were commonly known as Syrian Christians. Within this liturgical language there were two Syriac languages, one was the Eastern Syriac (Church of East) and other was the Western Syriac (Jacobite). The division between them was not just a linguistic one but also on theological aspects. In Kerala, it was the Eastern Syriac which was followed and thus was in communion with the Church of East whose seat was at Seleucia-Ctesiphon in modern day Iraq. Even though there were occasional gap in sending Bishops within this communion, it wasn't interrupted until the arrival of the Portuguese. Even though communion with the Church of East in Kerala was not a regular one, it received Bishops from it. The arrival of Portuguese interrupted this communion. For Portuguese, the discovery of route to Kerala's ports served two purposes, one to conquering and controlling the spice route and second to discover the mythical land of King Jasper, one of the Biblical Magi King. Initially, the St Thomas was welcoming towards the Portuguese missionaries. These missionaries grew their influence over the native Christian community it gradually led to conflict and finally altering its history. The theology which the Church of East followed were considered as heretical teachings by the western Catholic Church and similarly the till the fifteenth century Church of East did not accepted the supremacy of Rome. When These Portuguese missionaries realized that the St Thomas Christians were followers of the Church of East, they started indoctrination of St Thomas Christian into the Catholic fold. Inevitably this led to the famous Synod of Diamper (Udyamperoor -1599), which officially made St Thomas Christian and their Archdiocese under subjugation of Archdiocese of Goa which was administered under Latin Catholic Padroado. The Synod officially prohibited many books, customs which the Catholic Padroado felt as heretic in nature. Many manuscripts related to indigenous Christianity were burned and caused a irreparable change to St Thomas Christian community.

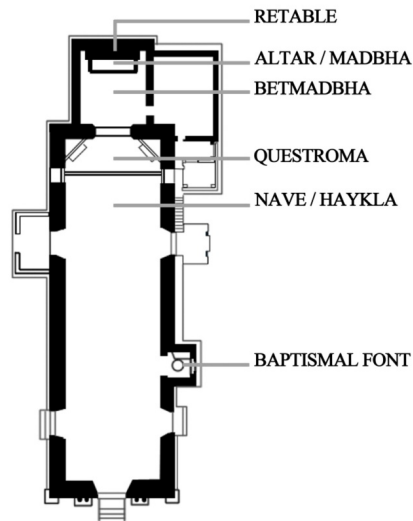


Fig.2, Plan of Church, Diminished Hall Plan, Martha Mariam Knanya Church, Kaduthuruthy, Kerala.



Fig 3, St Mary's Orthodox Church / Kottayam Cheriypalli, Kottayam, note the heavy wall and also the typical Portuguese entrance.

The mission activity under the Portuguese crown was known as Padroado. According to it the Pope, the Vicar of Christ, appoints the King of Portugal as his vicar for the eastern region, with almost unlimited ecclesiastical power. The division was actually made in between Spain and Portugal in order to resolve their conflicts over the overseas territories. The process was completed with the bull *Aeternae regis clementia* produced by Sixtus IV on 21 June 1481 which summed and confirmed all the privileges to the Crown of Portugal, it tried to create the hegemony of Portuguese crown over other factor from being dominating in that trade route. The navigation to these regions was restricted to Portuguese only. They were made the lords of the land which they discovered and most importantly it allowed The Portuguese crown to erect churches, monasteries and other places of religious usage there; the clergy who minister in such places were given full power to minister the sacraments and to pronounce absolution. According to this, the church was administered to be under the supervision of the King of Portugal, and the appointment of Bishops was also through him.

The first European church in India was constructed in 1503 with the factory and fort they made in Cochin. The earliest of missionary to come to Kerala were Dominican and Franciscans. The Jesuits arrived in 1512 and they heavily influenced on Syrian Christians.

With the Padroado, Jesuits and Portuguese empire enjoyed unparalleled supremacy in India. This gave rise of resentment among several other Catholic monastic order and also Rome, which in turn gave way to the establishment of Propaganda Fide, which made it possible for Rome to directly intervene in matter of sacraments and exercise ecclesiastical jurisdiction. One has to look this with the awareness that all these events are happening around same time when Reformation and Counter Reformation are happening. Also, the emergence of new European powers challenging Portuguese supremacy over the spice routes.

The Synod of Diamper was a painful event for the St Thomas Christians; it left them totally dissatisfied. Many series of events led into the culmination of Coonan Cross oath, which took place in Mattancherry on 3 January 1653. The members of St Thomas Christian community took pledge against the Jesuit and the Portuguese domination. This led Pope Alexander VII to send Carmelite missionaries using Propaganda Fide in order to appease the revolting community. The Carmelite missionaries with the help of Palliveetil Chandy were able to bring majority of dissenters in communion with the Rome. This inevitably divided the community into two groups *Puthencur (Orthodox)* and the *Parzhyacur (Catholic)*. Eventually

with time these group were further divided into various under the influence of various missionaries which came to India, and this effect of division is evident even today. Currently it is been divided into eight groups and two sub groups; they are, Assyrian Church of East (East Syriac Rite), Syro Malabar Catholic Church (East Syriac rite), SyroMalankar Catholic Church (West Syriac Rite), Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (West Syriac rite), Jacobite Orthodox Syrian Church (West Syriac), St Thomas Evangelical Church (Reformed), Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church (Reformed), Malabar Independent Syrian Church (Reformed). Apart from these groups there is an endogamous sub group which has divided itself among the Catholic and Orthodox rite known as the Knanaya Christians.

The Churches of St Thomas Christians

In Kerala, the Church architecture emerged from the European sources. Various colonial powers which came to Kerala beginning from the Portuguese to the British had its influences but when we look into the Church of Syrian Christian most of them are predominantly influenced by Portuguese, Dutch and most importantly the Jesuit architecture. But, how were their churches prior to the coming of Portuguese, it is still a debatable issue as there no concrete evidence on how these structures were prior to arrival of Europeans. It is considered that because of the native feature of the Syrian Christians their earlier architecture would have been following similar feature as that of the local temple architecture. But due to the lack of archaeological evidences it is assumed that the churches would have been made from mud and coconut leaf as the roofing as the domestic architecture would have been.

The church in Tamil Nadu in Thiruvamcode / Martandam, which considered to be as an ancient church. Thiruvamcode was a part of erstwhile Travancore dynasty, currently it is under Tamil. According to local myth this Church is the famous half church or *Arappalli* of the seven church that were established by St Thomas in Kerala. Architecturally it is an interesting structure. The church follows Syrian liturgical division which has mainly three parts; (I) Sanctum / *Betmadbha* which has altar / *Madbha*, (II) the antechamber / *Qestorma* and nave / *Haykla* which is for the people. The main entrance is on the western side and two other doors at northern and southern side respectively. There are certain elements such as the pillars, basement and upper wall moulding which has indigenous qualities. Based on the sculptural features on the pillars, it is assumed to be built around seventeenth century C.E. Though it may not fall into the category of Pre Portuguese architecture; it gives an idea how early churches might have looked like.

It is always assumed that most of the early / pre-Portuguese churches are supposedly built in the model of a temple. The temple has a linear approach in their architecture but because of the lack of evidence on how the earlier churches were, it is difficult to establish this as there had been a constant process of rebuilding of the churches on the same place of an older church, and another reason might have the usage of perishable materials for construction of the building. Till almost late 18th century the domestic houses in Kerala were built with laterite, mud and roof thatched with coconut leaves; roof tills were only allowed for royal families and temples, occasionally also to churches and mosques.

According Syrian liturgy the church architecture is demarcated into three spaces; (I) Sanctum / *Betmadbha* which has altar / *Madbha*, (II) the antechamber / *Qestorma* and nave / *Haykla* which is for the people. *Betmadbha* and *madbha* is demarcated as an elevated space. There are slight variations in the *Betmadbha* according to the rites to which the Church follows. For example, the Catholic Church would have three steps demarcating the *Qestorma* from the nave and rest two steps demarcating the *Qestorma* from the *Betmadbha*. In case of Orthodox Churches, *Qestorma* is demarcated by balustrade railing, and *Betmadbha* is elevated by five steps from *Qestorma*.



*Martha Mariam Knanya Church,
Kaduthuruthy, Kerala*



*Fig.4 The retablo and the painted ceiling of
St Anthony Syro Malabar Church., Ollur*

Apart from the liturgical segregation of the architecture, there are five major elements that are prominent in St Thomas Christian Churches. They are flagstaff or Dhvajasthambha, Piazza crosses or prominently known as Nazaranistambha, the facade, retablo and murals in the altar. Another important feature among the St Thomas Christian church was that the sanctum sanctorum was also demarcated from the exterior by the increased height of that particular region from the remaining area. This area is known as Thora, which supposedly originated from the Turrus, Latin word for tower. It was from Pulpit, that the priest would regularly give sermons during the holy mass. The churches mostly followed the Diminished Sanctuary plan in which single nave closes into smaller and narrower sanctuary. Apart from these are many other minor architectural elements such the boundary wall, locally known as Annamadhil (probably due its size and also its shape), padipura or gatehouse, which was evidence of the influences of local architectural traditions.

The coming of Portuguese influenced St Thomas very predominantly; it was so permanent that it integrated into their culture and was difficult to differentiate these influences. The similarity in the temple architecture, vihara with that of church architecture has always created confusion among the early visitors; Vasco da Gama when first arrived in Kerala mistook a temple for church. In Kerala, the temples have certain structures such as the *agrasala* (the ceremonial feast plan) and *koothambalams* (ritual performance hall) which is similar to the oblong plans which are followed by the churches and even mosques³.

Facades of The Churches

Regardless of the variation in the difference among the Syrian Christians and the Latin Christians the church architecture was very similar and facades were an important feature of these churches. The stylization of these facades reflected the transition phase in the architecture, in Kerala there was a clear transition from the Mannerist style to a Baroque.

The facade of Churches in Kerala has three distinct style, curved reticulated or plain Dutch gable is the most common facade, second one is the mannerist styled facade with curved scrolls; both of these styles are topped by a triangular or curved pediment; and last one is normal triangular gable facade, which at times

act as facade like in the case of Kottayam Veliyapalli and sometimes this facade integrates with the roofing gable as in the case of Kozhencheri Church in Kozhencheri and Karthikapalli Church in Mavelikara.

The facades are divided into three levels in a grid like pattern. Each grid had pilasters on corner supporting entablature with arched opening in the centre. The ground floor had the doorways, the central portion had arched niches and top portion had the oculus. On side of top pattern are the curved scroll patterns or a reticulated fan similar to that of Dutch gable. The facade of these churches were usually topped by *Pozzoan pediment*.

Occasionally these facades have relief stucco figures depicting angels on doorway and at side of niches; and yali like composite creature through whose mouth the curved reticulation for starts. At times instead of arched niche, stucco images are depicted showing biblical myths [placed in the niche topped with triangular pediments

Retables and Murals

Retables which erected as screen behind alter, were another major feature of Churches in Kerala. Unlike the church architecture, the retable was revealed their Iberian origins. It was sole focus in the Church, it was highly decorated which was complimented by sombre exterior. It had usually three tiers of niches flanked by pilaster topped with Corinthian foliage capital. The top of retable was curved or had triangular pediment which were similar to the facades outside. These retables were multi-coloured and were at times gilded. These structures attracted the attention of the viewer inside the church which was lit up through very few sources of light. The retables were decorated with the twisted vine creepers, corn, wheat and acanthus leaf which were also common decorative motif in the retables of churches of Goa and Portugal; none of these plants were grown in Kerala, thus giving away their Portuguese origins⁴. These retables were part of the whole architectural compositions.

There were cultural interactions among Portugal, Spain, France and Netherlands. The late Gothic language found in polychromatic wooden sculptures of Portugal was influenced from wooden sculptural tradition of Netherlands and France and also most importantly from its rival neighbour Spain. For a short duration of period Spanish and Portuguese empire were also united as one kingdom. Northern Europe was better known for the sculptural tradition which were bought to Spain, Portugal by the European artists predominantly French. From the medieval times onwards, French artist were constantly invited to the Portugal for the decoration of tombs, pulpits altars and chapels⁵.

The retable in Kerala churches were *Iconostasis Retable*, which had many arched compartments on each level, usually forming a grid like pattern which was similar to the facade of church. These compartments contained icon / image in sculpture or painting⁶. During the early period the mass was conducted facing the retable. Thus, retable was supposed to attract both as a visual and spiritual focus of people.

After the Synod of Diamper in 1599 it was deciding that every church under Roman denomination in Kerala in its altar would have image in them, as St Thomas Christians being followers of Church of East supposedly does not used any image. Thus, many churches had retable structures in them established. This was not removed until the division of the church of St Thomas Christians. The Syro Malabar community supposedly continued with the retable tradition but the orthodox tradition chose to discard it. Many discarded it and some kept it. The wall which was covered by the retable was also painted with murals.

Bethmadbha was also painted with murals; at some churches the betmadbha has arch with coffered pattern ceiling which is decorated with floral patterns or small putty figures. Another type of ceiling was



Fig 5, Marth Mariyam Metropolitan Cathedral, Changanassery, Kerala

simple arch which had smooth surfaces, it was usually depicted the Coronation of Virgin Mary in centre and foliage around her. Interestingly this foliage is stylistically closer to textile design which was prominent during this time period in South East Asia. The Murals usually depicted biblical themes such as Passion and Life of Christ, Life of Mother Mary, Acts of St Thomas etc. Murals were mostly painted inside the walls of sanctum sanctorum. They were also painted on the wall behind the retable. Just like the sculptures the mural imageries also originate from European sources; but the influences were not limited to the European sources.

Stone Crosses

The major feature of the St Thomas Christian is the huge open air granite stones which erected outside the Church. Interestingly it is the best example of incorporating both the elements of indigenous to create something which is unique and establishes ones identity, nowhere else in world one could find crosses like these. The can divided into the pedestal structure and the cross itself. Usually, no images are depicted on the cross. It is from the base of cross does decorative elements appear. The basement on which the cross is placed can be divided into three sections; top portion of the structure is the hemispherical structure which is placed on a hexagonal base which then placed on square platform which has a protruding extension. The pedestal of the cross looks very similar to the *Balikalus* (sacrificial stones) found in the temple complex of Kerala. The base of cross is well elaborately carved with mythical figure, angels and interestingly the *kudu* figures found on the base temple architecture. It is because of the incorporation many local elements and its indigenous design many people tend to attribute its date almost tenth century. But in reality, the stone cross of St Thomas Christians actually developed from the smaller crosses which was placed in front of the churches and these crosses were usually kept upon cylindrical or octagonal base which had either niches or had sculptural figures on them. The practice of keeping an open-air cross was very common in Portuguese church architecture.

The *Thora* or the tower which enclosed the altar also at times acted as the bell tower, even though belfry was a separate structure. The Thora was one of the most prominent feature which differentiated the St Thomas Christians churches, as it would stood out among rest of the roofing the church. Occasionally on exterior wall of thora there would small stucco relief figures which depict biblical images such as that of Peacocks, cross and also Huntsman shooting a tiger was depicted. These images were depicted only on St Thomas Christian churches, especially the image of the hunter accompanied by a dog or a gunman aiming at

a carnivorous animal probably leopard. The representation of such imagery both outside and in interior of a church were kind of statement made about their status in the particular society. There were myths regarding Syrian Christians being excellent marksmen and also stories about them clearing the forest and killing the tigers and leopard. Apart from these figures there were animal figures such as the two peacocks standing on the side of cross.

The Churches of St Thomas Christians presents an interesting insight into adaptive qualities of architecture and also the complexities of identity making. St Thomas Christians followed the European idiom of Church architecture despite their resentment towards the subjugation of belief, yet they followed it and adopted it. The architecture was language adapted and incorporated as their own. It became an integral part of their identity and also present exemplary example of cultural assimilations. It was not just Portuguese empire that left an lasting influence but rather various missionaries from Europe and Asia whose constant influx made it difficult to differentiate them.

- ¹ St Mary's Syrian Orthodox Church in Thiruvamcode (Tamil Nadu), Falk Reitz (Berlin), South Asian Arcaeology 1999, edited by Ellen M Raven.
- ² Chapter 3, TYPES OF CHURCH AND ALTAR, CHURCHES OF GOA - JOSE PERIERA, Oxford Monumental Legacy 2002
- ³ Pg 21 KOCHI - BEGINNINGS OF EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURE IN INDIA - JAYARAM PODUVAL; INDIA AND PORTUGAL Cultural Interactions, edited by Jose Pereria &Pratapaditya Pal; Marg Publication 2001.
- ⁴ Pg 22, KOCHI - BEGINNINGS OF EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURE IN INDIA - JAYARAM PODUVAL; INDIA AND PORTUGAL Cultural Interactions, edited by Jose Pereria & Pratapaditya Pal; Marg Publication 2001.
- ⁵ Pg 155 Ibid
- ⁶ Pg 28, Chapter 3, TYPES OF CHURCH AND ALTAR, CHURCHES OF GOA - JOSE PEREIRA, Monumental Legacy, Oxford University Press 2002

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