

Ikkako Kathanar - the forgotten martyr

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Introduction

Centuries before, an incident shook both the land of Malabar and the Saint Thomas Christian community; the murder of one of their priests, Ikkako Kathanar, by European missionaries at the church in Verapoly (Varappuzha).

This incident in 1771 AD resulted in long ramification in the turbulent history of the ancient community of Saint Thomas Christians whose existence was threatened by the colonisation of the Malabar Coast of south-west India by European powers beginning with the Portuguese.

History sets in

The Saint Thomas Christians, locally known as Mar Thoma Nasranis, Suriyani Nasranis, Syrian Christians or simply Nasranis trace their origin to the missionary works of Saint Thomas the Apostle, who in Aramaic (East-Syriac) is known as Mar Thoma Sleeha. This community of Christians that existed in many parts of India were eventually restricted to the south-west Malabar Coast of India, encompassing the modern state of Kerala and nearby regions. They followed the ancient Aramaic (East-Syriac) tradition in worship and Aramaic was their liturgical language. Aramaic was the language of Jesus Christ and His disciples as well. The Nasranis were profoundly attached to the Aramaic (East-Syriac) language and their Aramaic heritage. [1][2][3]

The Nasranis were a fiercely independent community under its head who was known as the Archdeacon (Jathikku Karthavyan) and he held the title of 'Archdeacon and Gate of All India'. The Archdeacon also commandeered an army of his own. Each church had its own church assembly consisting of priests and laymen. The Archdeacon was guided by a General Assembly, known as the Palli-Yogam, consisting of both priests and laymen representing all churches. European missionaries marvelled at this and called the community as a Christian Republic. [4]

Geographically, the Nasranis were located in territories ruled by local Hindu kings and vassals and ecclesiastically they were part of the (East-Syriac) Church of the East which sent Bishops from Babylon and Persia. The bishops for the most part exercised the power of order only and the Nasranis lived a peaceful community life for centuries this way.

But things were about to change for them soon with the advent of the Portuguese Vasco da Gama in 1498.

The Portuguese who arrived in the dawn of the 16th century attempted to forcefully westernise the Nasrani community and bring them under their political and ecclesiastical authority.

These attempts culminated in the so-called Synod at Diamper (Udayamperoor) in 1599 and the Nasranis were placed under the authority of the Portuguese Padroado. The Padroado was an agreement between the kingdom of Portugal and the Roman Catholic Church according to which Rome delegated the administration of local churches to the kingdom (later republic) of Portugal. The king (or queen) of Portugal appointed bishops for regions under their influence. Mostly the Padroado was made up of Jesuits.

Though the Nasranis longed to have bishops of their own tradition, the Portuguese colonial authorities prevented their arrival from Babylon and also curtailed the authority of the Archdeacon and the General Assembly.

The Nasranis revolted in 1653 at Mattanchery, Cochin (Kochi) and this revolt resulted in the 'Coonan Cross oath' against the local Portuguese Jesuit bishop.

In response to the revolt, the Pope sent emissaries directly through its Propaganda Congregation that was mainly Carmelites of various European nationalities to work out a compromise. Gradually, a large section of the community was convinced or forced to accept the ecclesiastical authority of the Propaganda who were historically forced to ordain a Nasrani, Mar Parampil Chandy, as their Bishop. This section of the Nasrani community came to be known as Pazhayakoor (Old Allegiance) and was divided between the jurisdiction of the Roman Propaganda that was based in Verapoly (Varappuzha) and the Portuguese Padroado that was locally based in Cochin (Kochi) and Cranganore (Kodungalloor) under the diocese of Goa. However, the Propaganda refused to ordain any other Nasrani as Mar Parampil Chandy's successor.

The faction that refused to return to European ecclesiastical jurisdiction formed the Puthenloor (New Allegiance) Nasranis. Though both factions of Nasranis longed to be re-united, European missionaries sabotaged those attempts fearing a unified Nasrani community. Eventually, the Puthenloor faction became Jacobites and adopted the Antiochian West-Syriac tradition in the 19th century.

Here we mainly deal with the happenings within the larger Pazhayakoor faction of the Nasranis, because it is in this milieu that the Ikkako incident took place.

Though forcefully colonised, the patriotic Nasranis tried to safeguard their faith, East-Syriac rite of worship and culture in all possible ways. They also made numerous attempts to bring East-Syriac Bishops of Babylon, who were of their own tradition, and to re-establish the position of Archdeacon and reinstate lost authority of the General Assembly. In the process the Nasranis and their leaders went through several hardships and some paid with their lives as well.

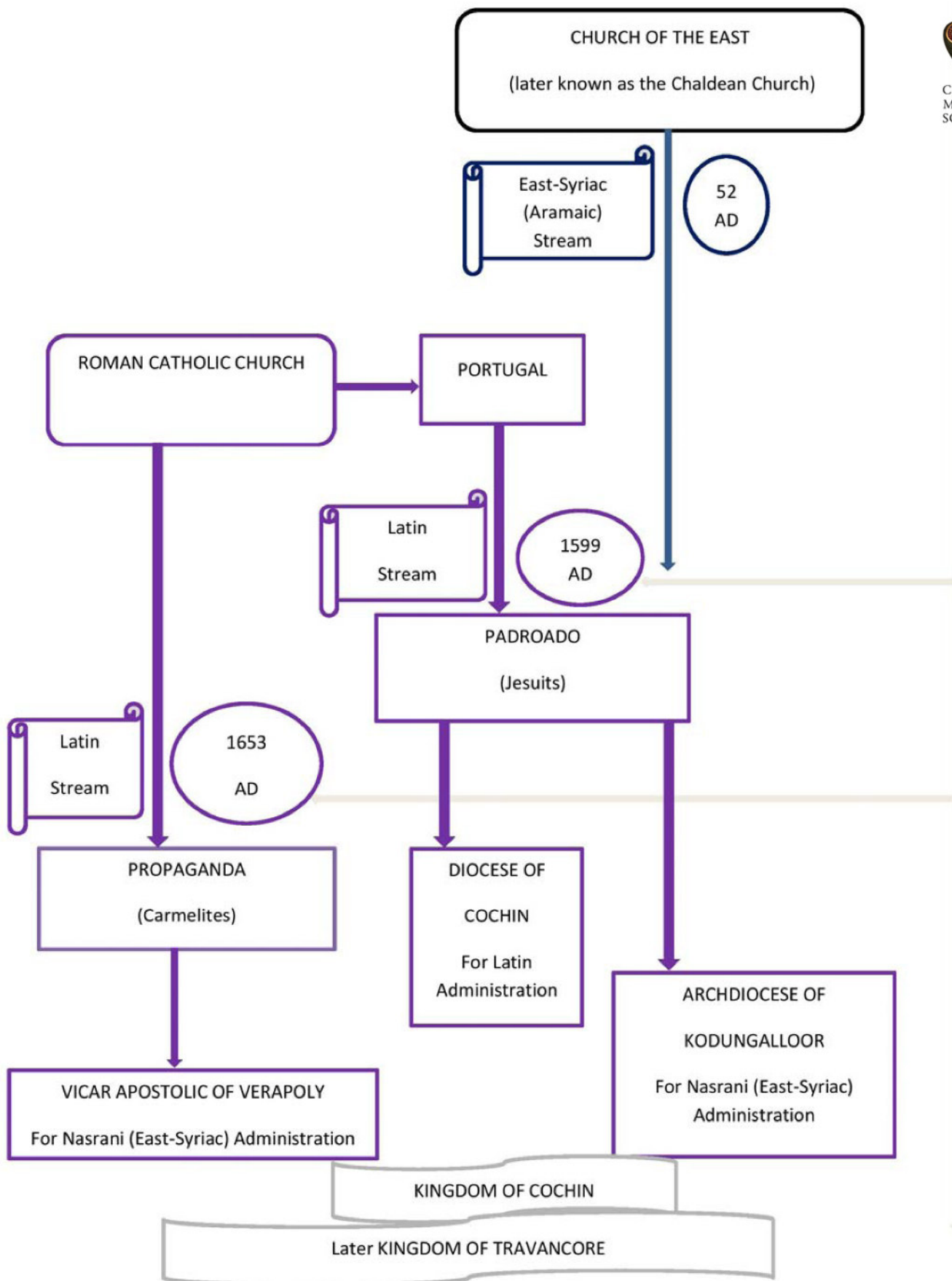


Figure 1: A pictorial overview of the religio-political situation of Nasranis during the time of Ikkako Kathanar.

One such martyr who laid down his life for the Church and nation is the priest, Fr. Jacob Puthenpurackal popularly known as Ikkako Kathanar of Champakulam-Kalloorkadu parish born in the Puthenpurackal family of Thekke Angadi. He was also

known as Chacko or Yakoov Kathanar. Yakoov is the Aramaic (Syriac) form and Chacko is the Malayalamised version of the name Jacob. The term Kathanar is used for Nasrani priests and it originates from the Aramaic (East-Syriac) word kashisa – presbyter. The term Padre is from the Latin language and was used for Latin rite priests, European and others.

Ikkako Kathanar lived during the time period when the Mar Thoma Nasranis nostalgically remembered their past glory but were disunited and too weak to fight off European Latin aggression. This martyr who made his name entwined in Nasrani history was soon forgotten and this chapter of history was hidden away by vested interests. Ikkako was the vicar of Edappally church at the time of his martyrdom. The struggle this priest and his Church went through continues to this day.

Kuttanadu : Champakulam – Kalloorkkadu church

Known as Kottanara in ancient records the Kuttanadu region is the rice bowl of Kerala. Located below the sea level this region is comparable to only Holland in Europe. Unlike other rice producing regions where water is brought in for cultivation, in Kuttanadu water is removed before planting saplings.

Kuttanadu has a large concentration of hardworking Nasranis and the Champakulam – Kalloorkkadu church is the most famous church in the region.

This church has several ancient inscriptions. One such Malayalam inscription is on the first wooden ornamented beam inside the church that reads “In the 1730th year of Mshihah's birth Thamalloor Itty-Kuruville Kathanar built this beam this year 905 in the month of Meenam”. (This is in AD 1730 and Kollam era or Malayalam calendar 905 in the month of March).

Itty-Kuruville's older brother was a Yaakov who moved into the household of Puthenpurackal. The protagonist of this article, Ikkako Kathanar was born to Yaakov's son Thommi.

Ikkako's home once stood at the same location where the St. Joseph's Mission Hospital is today.

Thekke Angadi (South Market) and Thachil Mathoo Tharakan

There is a market located on the south side of the Champakulam church known as the Thekke Angadi (South Market). This market prospered during the second half of the 17th century. The reason behind this prosperity was a trade agreement in 1642 between the Champakasherry king who ruled Champakulam and the Dutch with regard to trade centred on the Purakkadu (Porca in foreign records)