

# **“Jathikku Karthavian”: A Short History of the Rise, Rule and Recline of the Archdeacons in India**

**Mrs. Monisha George**

Assistant Professor on Contract, Department of History, Alphonsa College, Pala, Kerala.

Email: georgemonisha@gmail.com

**Abstract:** The St. Thomas Christian of India from time immemorial had followed their own form of liturgy, organization and discipline which suited their social custom. After coming in contact with her sister community, she adopted some elements of Chaldean liturgy and lost her unique identity. Till 16<sup>th</sup> century both Church of India and Chaldean church evolved and developed together. With the entry of Western missionaries, the church of India underwent a complete change in the organizational structure. The regressive status was of the office of Archdeacon, who was the National head of St. Thomas Christian, who had powers in matters of ecclesiastical and non-ecclesiastical. It was his responsibility to preserve the individuality and autonomy of his church. The Post Chaldean period, was a period of rivalry between the Archbishop and Archdeacon for the jurisdiction.

**Key Words:** Archdeacon, Chaldean, Nestorian, Archbishop, Latin Prelate, Liturgy.

## **1. INTRODUCTION:**

The word Archdeacon comprises of a Greek prefix ‘Arch’ meaning chief minister. This term first appeared in “*De Schismate Donatistarum*” written about 366 by St. Optatus, bishop of Melevis. For centuries this title was used to refer to the chief assistant to bishop rather than as a head of any group of deacons in church. In ancient time, the metropolitan of St. Thomas Christians of India was called as the Metropolitan of India. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Latin prelates and indigenous Bishop, Mar Alexander Parambil used to style themselves with the title “The Archdeacon of all India”, because the office of Archdeacon was the national head of Christian community. The origin of the institution of deaconate was depicted first in the Acts of Apostles. The first Archdeacon of the church was St. Stephen as the head of the seven deacons, who were elected by the whole body of disciples. The Apostles also specified the qualities required in a deacon, that they should not be double –tongued, drunkard, greedy or bigamous but chaste, pure of conscience, innocent etc.

The main duty of the deacon was to serve the bishop in sacred ministry and in charity work especially for downtrodden and poor. In the Apostolic Constitution, the deacon is represented as an angel and prophet of the bishop who would help him in communicating his mind and decision to the faithful. The title ‘Archdeacon’s origin is around 4<sup>th</sup> century probably in the East and its use spread throughout whole church rapidly.

## **2. Evolution of Archdeaconate in Latin Church:**

To understand the attitude of Latin missionaries towards the archdeacon of India, we must know the evolutionary stages that took place in the Institution of Archdeaconate. The evolution of archdeaconate can be divided into 5 phases according to the juridical figured which underwent changes and different forms it assumed.

- a) Archdeacon – the executive agent of bishop upto 7<sup>th</sup> century
- b) Archdeacon – the vicar of bishop up to 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century
- c) Archdeacon - prelate rival to the bishop from 10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century
- d) Archdeacon – a dignitary in canonical chapters in the following century
- e) Archdeacon – an honorary title given to vicar general in some dioceses

As time passed the archdeacons and bishops entered into conflicts over their jurisdiction, but these conflicts not only proved disastrous for the archdeacon as they lost their prominence with the decision of the Pope to limit their powers which also led to the decline of Archdeacon’s dominance. The apostolic constitution, *Qui Christi Domini*, of Pope Pius VII on 24<sup>th</sup> august 1801 suppressed all ancient ecclesiastical titles and dignities of France. Thus in Latin church the juridical figure of archdeacon, after undergoing these evolutionary changes has at present reached a stage of mere honorary title or capitulars dignitary with almost no jurisdiction in ecclesiastical matters.

## **3. Archdiaconate under the Chaldean Prelates during Pre-Portuguese period:**

Christianity has its origin from the evangelization of the Apostle St. Thomas as examined through the traditions, documents and monuments by the historians. As time passed these Christians came under the jurisdiction of the

Chaldean Patriarch. They held the church of India and used to send their metropolitans to govern. The archdeacons, archbishops, periodeuts etc. were assisted by these Chaldean bishops in the governance of their churches and in return the help of these assistants was necessary for the metropolitans from abroad. According to Germann W. the institution of Archdiaconate of India was initiated by the coming Thomas of Cana in 345 as the head of a Christian colony from Middle-East. It may be true as this title also had its origin more or less about same time. The reorganization of the then dwindling community of the St. Thomas Christians is credited to this Thomas. The Church was reorganized under the Pastoral care of a bishop and an archdeacon from among the native Christians and it was determined that the archdiaconate be the first dignity in the church of India after the episcopate and they must be from the family of Pakalomattam. It was stated by Mar Thomas VIII , Bishop of Indian Jacobites and the last but one dignitary from this privileged family, that all the archdeacons from 345 to 1653, had been from the family of Pakalomattam in hereditary succession. But the regulation of this sort of dignity granted to a single family, induces us to suppose that there existed already some kind of authority in this family. According to tradition, from the time of St.Thomas the Apostle there had been priests and bishops in this family.

#### **4. Archdiaconate under the Chaldean Prelates after the arrival of Portuguese :**

According to a *Padiyola*, a written document on palm leaves, presently in possession of Pothanikat family at Kothmangalam gives information about the archdeacon in the sixteenth century. It also refers to the Archdeacon as ‘*Jathikku Karthavian*’, literally meaning head of the caste, i.e. the head of the St. Thomas Christians and authorizes him to judge the ecclesiastical affairs of the church. Rev. George Kurian in his dissertation on the Syrian Church of India speaks of the appointment of George Pakalomattam as the archdeacon and successively followed by Jacob, Alexander and George. The first George referred here is known as George Ittikuriath and the last George is known to be the Archdeacon George of the Christ.

#### **5. Archdeacon George of Christ:**

From the mid sixteenth century, we find sources referring to Archdeacon of India. First we need to understand the historical background to know all these personalities. In 1552, after death of the Chaldean Bishop Mar Jacob, an uncle of Archdeacon George of Christ, requested a bishop for the St. Thomas Christians to the Chaldean Patriarch. In response Mar Abraham was sent to Malabar in 1556 by the Nestorian Patriarch Mar Simeon. At the same time two Chaldean bishops, Mar Elias and Mar Joseph, were sent to Malabar by Catholic Chaldean Patriarch Mar Abdiso, but they were detained by Portuguese authorities at Bassain. They were finally permitted to travel to Malabar in 1557 to combat the Nestorian bishop, Mar Abraham. In 1558 Mar Abraham escaped from the custody of Portuguese at Mozambique. Pope Pius IV sent back Mar Abraham to Patriarch Abdiso and recommended to appoint him as the archbishop of Angamaly and also wrote letters to the archbishop of Goa and to the bishop of Cohin. But the viceroy and Archbishop of Goa detained Mar Abraham in Dominican Monastery when he arrived at Goa. Somehow he escaped and joined his flock and governed the St. Thomas Christians till his death in 1597.

It was according to Chaldean canon law, that every bishop should have their own archdeacons to assist them. Both Bishops Mar Abraham and Mar Joseph had archdeacons when they were in Malabar. Mar Abraham ordained an archdeacon in south, leaving the archdeacon from Pakalomattam family in North. He shifted his residence to southern parts fearing the Portuguese, from Angamaly to Kaduthuruthy and then to Kottayam, so that he could be under the protection of the king of Thekkumkur. In 1558 when Mar Abraham was deported, Mar Joseph must have ordained two archdeacons but appointed only one Archdeacon as his vicar to govern the St. Thomas Christian community. There are two ethically different communities among St. Thomas Christians one “vadakkumbhagakar” and another “Thekkumbhagakar”, literally meaning ‘those on northern side’ and ‘those on southern side’.

We get much information about the power and authority exercised by Archdeacon George from the reports of Jesuits. The short interval between the deportation of Mar Joseph and the arrival of Mar Abraham, Archdeacon George governed the St. Thomas Christian community. The Jesuits praise him of his great capability, learning, virtues, zeal and could be entrusted with great responsibilities. Fr Francis Dionysio wrote to the Jesuit General “There is in this Christianity a priest, native of this country belonging to the Malabar Caste, approved for his virtues and habits, learned and experienced in ecclesiastical matters. He knows the Sacred Scripture and understands and speaks Chaldean. He is esteemed very much by these Christians, and before the gentle kings and lords holds influence and recognition. He is the Archdeacon of Angamal and helps the Archbishop serving him as his provisor. He is a man of confidence and for his great ability the Episcopal dignity is quite fitting to him, but he will not accept it, seeking only to serve the archbishop in all humility and not the honours with their burden.” (pp.19-20).

Both the spiritual and temporal matters of Christian community in Malabar rested on the shoulders of the Archdeacon, so he was always conscious of his responsibility and acted accordingly. He had requested the help of the King of Cohin with rector of Jesuit college and captain of the town to oust the Chaldean bishop Mar Simeon from Malabar. Archdeacon had to look after the needs of Archbishop, for that an amount was fixed for each church, which

he used to collect while visiting his people. During religious ceremonies the donations were collected by him and it was used for the marriages of orphans, for construction or repair works of church, lend money to poor and to redeem captives etc. To promote the good of his community, the Archbishop and Archdeacon tried for favours from the King of Portugal. To foster devotion and spirituality in the community, they requested for relics of saints and special jubilees. They also requested for a press to print Chaldean and get translated the Roman missal and breviary and introduce in their church. In 1583, they convoked Synods in two places. These Synods had a tendency to Latinize the church of Malabar under the influence of Portuguese missionaries. From these Jesuits information, we understand that the Holy See recognized the honourable and responsible position of the Archdeacon of India. Pope Gregory XIII issued five Apostolic Briefs to Archdeacon George within a period of 5 years, to praise him and grant him new privileges. The exact date of his death is unknown, but Malabar sources fixes the death of Archdeacon George in 1585.

#### **6. Archdeacon John:**

The next Archdeacon was a brother of archdeacon George of Christ, about him a reference is made in a report by Archbishop Ros in 1622, whom the Jesuits were proposing for the Archidiaconal dignity in case Archdeacon George was made the bishop. So the brother of Archdeacon George must be “Lona Casanar Archdiago”, where ‘Lona’ is a Malayalam version of Iohannan (John). Not much has been known of his activities, besides his initiatives in rebuilding the Vaipicotta church which was burned down in 1584 by Muslims in a quarrel with Christians, when the King of Parur granted certain privileges to Muslims, which was earlier enjoyed by Christians.

#### **7. Archdeacon Jacob:**

Fr. Jacob was appointed as an Archdeacon by Mar Simeon, to look after his devotees during his absence, when he had gone to see the Holy Father in Rome to appeal him against the missionaries who charged him of heresy because he opposed the Latinization of Malabar church. He maintained his authority against the Latinizing policy of Mar Abraham and he rejected the Gregorian calendar. He taught his followers to pray the Chaldean Divine Office and live the Chaldean way of life. He also consecrated altars, chalices etc. He also preached at Kuravilangadu that Virgin Mary was not a virgin after birth of Christ. Archbishop Menezes of Goa condemned him and asked him to submit to Archbishop Mar Abraham. But the archdeacon did not obey and died in rebuke.

#### **8. Archdeacon George of the Cross:**

In 1594 George of the Cross was appointed as the new Archdeacon of Mar Abraham, who was the nephew of George of the Christ. His appointment was against the will of Jesuit Fathers. Later on the relation of Archdeacon and Jesuits improved and Archbishop agreed to ordain the seminaries of Vaipicotta. Mar Abraham had requested the Pope to appoint Archdeacon George as a coadjutor to him with the right of succession as had always followed his Archbishop in everything even his heresies. In 1595, when Mar Abraham fell ill, he made a testament announcing the archdeacon as the administrator of the See after his death. In 1597, Mar Abraham passed away and Archdeacon took charge of the dioceses administration according to the testament of Mar Abraham. But the Archbishop of Goa Alex de Menezes, wrote a patent letter appointing Fr. Ros S.J as Vicar Apostolic to govern the Sea of Angamaly which was suspended by Jesuit superiors. However Archdeacon George was accepted as governor by the Christians, so Menezes had to confirm him as the Governor along with it he appointed two consulates Fr. Ros and Rector of Vaipicotta, without their consent, archdeacon was not allowed to make important decisions. Even this patent was rejected by Archdeacon as the governor without any restriction of power. Fr. Jonas Thaliath in his book “The Synod of Diamper” agrees that Menezes had the authority to appoint a Vicar Apostolic to govern the archdiocese of Angamaly according to the two Briefs issued by the Holy See in the year 1595 and 1597. Albeit before the arrival of 3<sup>rd</sup> Brief, Archdeacon had taken charge and Menezes had no business to interfere in the matters of Angamaly henceforth.

Menezes had ordered Archdeacon to take the profession of faith on Feast day before the Jesuits. Instead, he denied all authority to Menezes over the church of St. Thomas Christians and convened a synod at Angamaly, a solemn oath was taken that all will follow the Archdeacon and they would not introduce any innovation till a new Archbishop was sent by the Patriarch of Babylon. Later Archdeacon was forced to make the profession of faith in the presence of the ecclesiastical and civil authorities of Cochin except Jesuits but the Jesuits rejected it on the ground of insufficiency stating the faith was made in Portuguese, which the archdeacon wouldn't have understood. It is clear from the writings of missionaries that the real problem was not the orthodoxy of Archdeacon but the emulation and rivalry among the religious orders and the ultimate sufferers were the St. Thomas Christians who had to sacrifice their interests.

Legitimately only the Archdeacon had jurisdiction over the church under Chaldean Patriarch and archbishop of Goa had no metropolitan right over the See of Angamaly. Any exercise of jurisdiction in the church of St. Thomas by Menezes, could be considered as an intrusion by outsider because the archdeacon was trying to preserve the individuality and independence of his ancient church with its purity. But finally a consensus was made by Archdeacon in order to prevent a division among St. Thomas Christian and since the foresaw an excommunication by menezes and promotion

of another archdeacon to the archidiaconal dignity. Under pressure, he promised to break all relations with Chaldean Patriarch. With this incidence, the metropolitan right of Chaldean Patriarch ceased to exist over church of India.

Now from these historical writing, we can understand the nature of office of archdeacon. Fr. Ros calls the Archdeacon as Vicar General and annual report of 1591 refer him as ex officio (teacher of all). Another report of Dionysio addresses him as the Vicar General and Provisor of Archbishop, the first dignity after the Archbishop. He was recognized as administrator of the see in the absence of archbishop and together they planned reforms in liturgy of church. Apart from ecclesiastical affairs he had certain rights and privileges in civil matters too. He had great influence before the kings. He was first among the 72 princes of Perumpatapil and he was the one who crowned the King. Archdeacon used to advice the king in matters of St. Thomas Christians. According to the rank and position of Archdeacon in the society, he had kept his dignity and nobility, so he would not dine with common people and was accompanied by priests and Christian soldiers. When the missionaries became the Prelates of St. Thomas Christians, they began to encroach their paramount over the archaic organizational structure of Christianity and debase the dignity of archdeacon.

## **9. Archdiaconate George of the Cross under the Latin Prelate:**

After synod of Diamper, Menezes recognized Archdeacon as ecclesiastical governor of Angamaly, but he had to seek the counsel of Fr. Ros and Fr. Brito in important matters. In case of disagreement the matter would be presented to Bisop of Cochin or Archbishop of Goa. In December 1599, Fr. Francis Rs was appointed as Bishop of Angamaly and reduced the status o See to a bishopric, suffragan to Goa. In 1600, the right of Portuguese Padroado was extended over See of Angamaly. But this decision had great repercussion on the Faithful who were against the degradation of their ancient Metropolitan see to a mere bishopric under Goa. A synod of Angamaly was convened by bishop Ros, as synod of Diamper was unbearable by St. Thomas Christians, so a more practical and comprehensive legislation was passed for the good governance and pastoral care of Faithful.

Bishop Ros requested 2 things to Holy See and the King of Portugal first to restore the ancient metropolitan status and second to change the ancient metropolitan status and second to change the seat from Angamaly to Cranganore. A Brief was sent by the Pope transferring the seat to Cranganore in 1607 on the feast of St. Thomas. This move was resisted by the Archdeacon because only a few families of St. Thomas Christians stayed at Crangnore. All of them had left Crangnore, as it was under Portuguese jurisdiction, the missionaries had compelled the St. Thomas Christians to follow their Latin customs such as eating fish and drinking wine during lent, prohibiting married clergy to perform sacerdotal ministry etc. Another reason of Archdeacon's disagreement was the publication of the book "*Jornada*" of Archbishop Menezs, which considered heresy to the church of St. Thomas Christians. These various reasons led to the alienation of Archdeacon from his bishop.

## **10. Excommunication of Archdeacon:**

Bishop Ros had excommunicated the Archdeacon for helping the Armenian bishop, who was sent by the Chaldean Patriarch, escape from Alangad. He was teaching many heresies like rejecting the supremacy of Pope, allowing priests to marry and prohibiting the use of statues. But the Cochin Bishop and many Francisan had backed the Archdeacon. Meanwhile Archbishop Ros had appointed an old priest as new Archdeacon from Kaduthurthy, which was against the norms of royal patronage. In 1615, Archdeacon extended a hand of reconciliation and submitted himself to the Archbishop Ros and his excommunication was absolved. Archbishop Ros had also nominated Archdeacon as the administrator after his death and Fr. Antony Toscano as co administrator. They both worked in harmony.

After the death of Archbishop Ros, Fr. Stephen Brito was consecrated as next Archbishop of Canganore. He was whole heartedly welcomed by the Archdeacon and the Christian community. Bishop Brito had also recognized Archdeacon's previous authority and privilege which he had enjoyed under Chaldean Prelate. In 1926, the Archdeacon with Archbishop founded anew religious congregation of St. Thomas and 30 rules drafted were in the church of St. Peter and St. Paul at Edapally. There was also a period complete disagreement between Fr. Brito and Archdeacon. The Archbishop were always tried to limit or even diminish the authority of the Archdeacon, whereas the archdeacon and his supporters – Dominicans, Augustinians and Franciscan accused Archbishop of his dictatorship and high-handedness, of being ignorant of their liturgy language and defrauding the priest and of taking away the administrative rights of Archdeacon. Reconciliation was made between them by the initiative of Jesuits. The epitaph found now states the death of Archdeacon in 1640 and he was buried at Angamaly.

People admired his intellectual and administrative capabilities. No one would question his moral integrity, even though accused of schism, insubordination, heresy, of not saying the Holy Mass except on the Easter, etc. He was always respected by his Faithful. The reason for the conflict between the Archdeacon and missionaries was his zeal to keep the individuality and nobility of his church and the age old rites. He wanted to defend his authority by all means, which he and his predecessors enjoyed under the Chaldean metropolitans. An inexperienced foreign Archbishop was fated to commit a mistake in a church which had its different culture, rite and civilization. Instead of imposing their Latin rite,

the Archbishop should have respected the age-old rite and organization of the church and adapted themselves to the existing set-up.

### **11. Archdeacon Thomas:**

Archbishop Brito after the death of George of the Cross, raised his nephew Fr. Thomas to the Archdiaconal dignity. From 1641, Archbishop Francis Garcia took charge, who was coadjutor and successor to Brito. He appointed a Vicar General other than the archdeacon. This was enough to raise a conflict between the Archbishop and Archdeacon, as it was against the agreement made by Archbishop Brito and Archdeacon George. There were several attempts made by the then Viceroy Philip de Mascarenhas and few Carmelites to bring peace between them, but all the efforts went in vain without realizing any reconciliation between them. Though Archdeacon wanted to come in good terms with the Archbishop, but Garcia would not part with his jurisdiction with the Archdeacon.

### **12. The Coonan Cross oath – Open Revolt:**

In 1652, at the request of Archdeacon, a Catholic Archbishop of the Syrian rite, Mar Attallah had been deputed by the Coptic Patriarch to govern the St. Thomas Christians. Knowing the intention of Mar Attallah, he was detained by the missionaries in the Jesuit college of Mylapore. As soon as this information reached the Arcdeacon, he convoked a meeting of clergy and laity at Diamper to release the Patriarch and requested the Archbishop to allow Attallah to come to Malabar. But Archbishop ingenuously rejected their request on the ground that although Attallah was sent by the Pope, he had no authorization from the king of Portugal. Albeit the ecclesiastical and secular authorities of Cochin supported the Archdeacon's request, Archbishop and the missionaries opposed it and sent Attallah to Goa without letting the Christians to see him. This move annoyed them all.

This provocation was the *raison d'être* for the infamous event in the history of Malabar, the Coonan Cross oath which took place on January 3, 1653. The infuriated mob moved to Mattancherry and made a solemn oath never to obey the Jesuits. The gathering declared the Archbishop deposed and made the Archdeacon as the ecclesiastical Head. During the Feast of Jonas at Edapally, Archdeacon was declared as the Archbishop of St. Thomas Christians and began to exercise all Episcopal functions. He ordained priests and appointed them vicars. He had the support of majority of St. Thomas Christians in his revolt and recognized him as their legitimate Archbishop. During this open revolt, the inquisition of Goa sent several commissioners for negotiations, but against the will of commissary, the Archbishop announced the excommunication of Archdeacon. The efforts of commissioners failed.

### **13. Conclusion**

Another Apostolic commissary Fr. Joseph O.C.D was sent to Malabar for reconciliation. He requested the Archdeacon and the mass to submit themselves to the Archbishop. Except for the four churches of Southists, Edapally Muttam, Mattancherry and Alangad, others rejected his request. The four churches had openly announced their obedience to the Archbishop. A group from the communities of the Northists accepted the Apostolic commissary and the primacy of the Pope and invalidated the consecration of the Archdeacon. Thus by the end of 1657, there existed 3 sections of St. Thomas Christians; one obeying the Archbishop, second following the rebellious Archdeacon and third accepting the primacy of the Pope but reluctant to submit themselves to the Archbishop. A final Apostolic commissary Fr. Hyacinth of St. Vincent also followed the steps of Fr. Joseph and was empathetic towards Archdeacon and his followers, but his efforts to bring the Archdeacon to obedience also failed. Finally in 1659 the commissary declared the excommunication of the Archdeacon.

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