

HISTORY / STORY : NO LAST WORDS : A RESPONSE

Scaria Zacharia

Dr. MGS Narayanan's presentation on *Nambudiris - Migration and Early Settlements in Kerala* deserves special attention of all students of Nazrani (Thomas Christian/Syrian Christian) historiography. A lot of literature produced in Malayalam, English and several other languages under the generic title Nazrani history refers to the origin of Nazrani community as the result of miraculous conversion of Nambudiris to Christianity by St. Thomas. Many writers provide exact dates, places and details of the conversion. There are many family histories, which boldly trace the origin of the families to particular families of Nambudiris who were converted to Christianity in the first century by St. Thomas.

Inconsistency

Dr. Narayanan's presentation has clearly brought out the striking inconsistency between Kerala history and Nazrani history. This is not the first time that this point is focused. A few Christian historians have brought out this glaring disparity in some of their works but the majority especially those who are attached to religious establishments continued to maintain traditional narration. Now it is very clear that contemporary historical methods cannot approve the traditional idea of the origin of Thomas Christians from Nambudiris. Of course one can question the very validity of the historical method which is used for the validation of traditions. But no Christian historian seems to take up this theoretical question. Many writers accept the tradition of Nambudiri heritage as an 'article of faith' which cannot be questioned; others would consider it as a matter of common sense. There are others who dare to provide additional proofs by resorting to gimmicks. The best example is the strange readings of Sangam texts done by some over zealous Christians. They don't care for

Principles of textual criticism or hermeneutics of literary texts. No serious student of Sangam literature has approved these readings as evidenced by the presentations of two Tamil scholars here. Still these readings are propagated through some Christian books and Christian classrooms in Kerala and that too by a team with no credentials to interpret ancient Tamil texts. All these groups feel offended if any one dares to question the historical validity of Nambudiri heritage of Thomas Christians.

Dialogic Historiography

Dr. Rajan Gurukkal in his response to the presentation has provided more reasons to weaken the theory of Nambudiri origin of Nazranis. I hope, Thomas Christian writers who swear by the Nambudiri heritage will take up the challenge offered by these eminent scholars and open up a meaningful dialogue. History, as modern historiography testifies is based on discursive practices. Historical statements are made possible through explanations and interpretations. So it is very important that Thomas Christian scholars who adhere to the theory of Nambudiri origin enter into an academic dialogue with eminent historians like MGS and Gurukkal. This dialogic mode will produce better historical understanding about the origin of Nazranis. For a Christian scholar this investigation has theological significance. This dialogue if held in proper spirit and openness to others will provide feedback about the witness role of Thomas Christians in Kerala society. Nazranis have self perceptions - images of their own or self history. But others also have perceptions about Nazranis, images of traditional Christians in Kerala. It is good to exchange these perceptions or images of Nazranis to deepen our understanding of this community and the process historicization itself.

Narration and Struggle for Identification

For me history is a narration and it serves several purposes in our society. The structure and functions of a na-

rative are conditioned by the situation - narrators, milieu, audience, media, aims, ideology etc. The Nambudiri narration by Nazranis has the primary aim of establishing the caste identity of Thomas Christians. 'Nambudiri' in this narration is not a particular caste but just a name for the upper caste. The self perception and social roles of Nazranis prompt them to look for historical validation of their position as a forward community in the social hierarchy of Kerala society. The process of imagining the past has been discussed in various disciplines. The social stratification and heirarchisation of Kerala society, as these two historians have pointed out, took place in later years. But this does not prevent the Nazranis from imagining themselves as the descendents of Nambudiris converted to Christianity. The historical problem arises because Nazranis are more convinced that their forefathers were converted by apostle Thomas, the disciple who lived with Jesus Christ. The anxiety to reconcile St. Thomas connection and Nambudiri heritage has resulted in narrations which cannot be validated by historical methods.

For Nazrani identity, as evidenced by statements of the members of the community in various periods, the Thomas connection is the fundamental element. Let us label this as Thomas Christian consciousness. It may be recalled that the Nazranis who confronted the Western Christians described their way of life as *Marthomayute Margavum Vazhipatum* 'The way and traditions of St. Thomas'. This is the principle they used to define the other - the Western Christianity. They said: 'We follow the way of Thomas and you follow the way of Peter'. The Canons of the Synod of Diamper (1599) bear testimony to this struggle of identification.

Self Perception of Nazranis

Decree VII: Session III of the Synod of Diamper (1599) records the process of self perception, and the construction of the other. Please note that the decree is written as a western response to the self perception of Nazranis.

“The Synod is with great sorrow sensible of that heresy, and perverse error, sown by the schismatics in this diocese, to the great prejudice of souls; which is, that there was one law of St. Thomas, and another of St. Peter, which made two different and distinct churches, and both immediately from Christ; and that the one had nothing to do with the other; neither did the prelate of the one owe any obedience to the prelate of the other; and that they who had followed the law of St. Peter, had endeavoured to destroy the law of St. Thomas, for which they had been punished by him; all which is a manifest error, schism, and heresy, there being but one law to all Christians, which is that which was given and declared by Jesus Christ the son of God, and preached by the Holy Apostles all over the world, as one faith, one baptism, there being but one Lord of all, and one catholic and apostolic church, of which our Lord Christ, God and man, who founded it, is the only spouse; and one only universal pastor, to whom all other prelates owe obedience, the Pope and Bishop of Rome, successor in the chair of St. Peter, the prince of the Apostles; to whom our Lord Jesus Christ bequeathed that supreme authority, and by him to his successors; which catholic doctrine is necessary to eternal life: wherefore the Synod doth command all parish priests, and preachers, to treat often of this matter, by reason of the great need there is of having this bishopric well instructed therein”.

It is evident that the Nazranis who met Christians from the Western world in the 16th century wanted to assert their identity not in terms of Brahminical heritage but of St. Thomas heritage (*Marthomayute Margam*). That is why they spoke of the Law of Thomas, not the Law of Brahmin.

Performance of Caste Identity

Identity is not stagnant. It is evolving through history. So we prefer to use the term Identification rather than identity. The caste consciousness of Nazranis must be associated with the prosperity of the community and heirarchisation of the

Kerala society in later years of the Christian era. This has to be detailed in the larger context of the social formations in Kerala. Many myths including Parasurama story of *Keralolpatti* were formed in later periods to rationalise the then existing social formations. As part of heightened rationality and modernism in twentieth century casteism subsided for a while in Kerala society. Now once again casteism overasserts and as part of it Nambudiri heritage appears as part of Nazrani identification. In short I would suggest that Nambudiri connection must be explained as part of a narrative to perform the caste identity of Nazranis. Depending on the ideology and world view, a Nazrani may or may not perform this identification as evidenced by the divergent responses to this question by various Christians.

Living History

This is a topic that deserves further study. But the aim of the study may not be discovering the past but understanding the present and interpreting the LIVING HISTORY. Living history is a kind of performance. A good example of living history is the annual solemn royal procession of the senior member of the royal family of Travancore to Sreepadmanabha temple in Trivandrum. Other examples more familiar to Thomas Christians are the liturgical Calendar and pious rituals like the way of the Cross. Any act of commemoration has a dimension of the past but it is more related to the present. The structure and function of the commemoration may be explained, interpreted and interiorised by the performers in the living context to tide over the challenges of the present. Thomas Christian narrations about Nambudiri heritage also may be studied as living history. Structures and functions of various narrations about Nambudiri connection have to be analysed as part of the process of IDENTIFICATION. Nazranis are trying to define themselves in the context of the heirarchised society. Folk-songs, folk-tales and folk-etymologies can be subjected to such an analysis.

Folklore and Generic interpretations

Christian folklore genres deserve typological classification and particular modes of interpretation based on contemporary theories. Contemporary theories of literature, folklore and cultural Studies will provide fresh insights into the process of historicisation. Genres based on social, linguistic and literary practices have to be differentiated in the analysis. This is the area in which Thomas Christian studies fail miserably. Even modern researches rely on different types of narrations about the past and treat them alike as source materials. Any treatise on the origin of Knanite community will provide very good examples for this type of unscientific approach to narration. The identity of Knanite community has been described in different ways in different narrations. Many writers just mix them up to prove their favourite ideas about this community. This exercise has produced a lot of literature verging on communal hysteria. Both Northists and Southists have contributed to this collection of narrations about the Knanite community. There are non Christians like Pulluvans who maintain many folksongs about Thomas of Cana and his descendents. The Knanite community itself has a rich folklore about their past. A student of Knanite history has to classify these source materials and subject them to generic analysis. Then it becomes a rich source material for the identification of the Knanite community. The same material through contrastive analysis will yield knowledge about social process in the Kerala society. Each narration, including copper plates and rock inscriptions provide situated knowledge. Modern theories and methodologies have brought out the contested nature of knowledge provided by different narrations including academic history. A discourse/narrative is a socially produced way of talking or thinking about a topic. 'It is defined by reference to the area of social experience that it makes sense of, to the social location from which that sense is made, and to the linguistic or signifying system by which that sense is both made and circulated' (John Fiske 1996 : 129) So the sociology of knowledge has become a very relevant aspect of research methodology.

Counter Narratives and Contemporary Cultural Studies

In this connection it is important to remember that there are parallel narratives about the lineage of Thomas Christians. A considerable section of scholars trace the origin of these Christians to conversion from Buddhism. They point out similarities in the teachings of Buddhism and Christianity, and the decline of Buddhism in Kerala in the early centuries of Christian era. The use of words like *Palli* (Church) also points in this direction. *Palli* is a Pali word and Pali is the language of Buddhist discourses. Many Thomas Christians, especially of those areas, usually identified as former centres of Buddhism like Karunagappally, Kayamkulam and Harippadu maintain the oral tradition that they are descendants of converts from Buddhism. There are Thomas Christians with oral traditions that they are descendants of converts from Jews. Many others recite folk-narratives to prove that they are descendants of Christian immigrants from the Middle East. So Christian folklore about the origin and development of the community has to be understood with all the available variants. Any attempt to collect the folk-traditions of Thomas Christians in possible varieties will be a valuable contribution to the study of the cultural heritage of Kerala. Little narratives and local knowledge with distinctions based on class, caste, race and gender are receiving greater attention in contemporary cultural studies. Theories and methodologies of contemporary cultural studies emphasize the importance of ideological study of traditions. They open up possibilities of interpretation and expand circles of understanding. This may disappoint those who are looking for objective truths and mono causal explanations. The post structural studies with its accent on ideological differentiation emphasize the discourse / narrative nature of history.

Before I conclude this response, let me briefly point out the major problems of perception in the historiography of Thomas Christians.

Politics of Religion

New disciplines like History of Religion and Sociology of Religion are contributing to the development of Religious studies. The impact of these disciplines is visible in theology and missiology of Christian churches. The Monopolistic claims of truth and metaphysics of religions are subjected to social analysis and social theorisation. The recent Papal apology for the past atrocities committed in the name of Christianity is a striking example. Many Christian doctrines are rephrased in the light of wisdom gained through new contributing disciplines with scientific methods.

However, there is a discipline which is yet to develop but that can change religious knowledge especially Christian historiography. This discipline may be labelled as the Politics of Religion. The history of Christianity in India, especially the developments after the advent of the Portuguese must be scanned for the politics of religion. The Portuguese played politics. Several religious orders like Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans and Carmelites played politics. The decision to close down the famous Basel mission Press in Mangalore during the world war can be understood only in terms of politics interfering with religion. Even the development of Bible Society of India promoting and suppressing different versions has to be interpreted in the light of politics of religion. The understanding of Politics of Religion is necessary to interpret Christian records, especially missionary records. Religious decisions were made with political motives and self interests of various denominations. Adventurous historians of Christian missions have attempted this type of analysis. But this is yet to develop as a discipline within Christian Studies.

In the present context of India, politics of religion indulges in misinterpretation of missionary records. Arun Shourie's attempt to reinterpret Christian mission history may be cited as a contemporary example of Politics of Religion interfering with historiography.

Colonialism and Post-colonialism

The paradigms of Colonialism and Post-colonialism create tension in the historiography of Thomas Christians. Many Christian missions and Christian denominations owe their origin to the establishments in foreign countries. Names like Syrian Christians, Latin Christians, LMS, Basel Mission, American Baptists remind foreign connections. Some of these names denote factual historical connections. Some others are nicknames used to attribute foreign connections to remind Christians that they have a foreign origin. These names create prejudices and confuse both historians and ordinary people. Sometimes these names cause 'sickness of language' and end up in the creation of myths. The best example is the name 'Syrian Christian'. This is an appellation used by the Dutch and popularised by the British to designate the traditional Thomas Christians of India who had been using the name 'Nazranis'.

During the last fifty years of political independence Indian Christians as part of decolonisation process have tried to change some of these appellations. Names like CSI and CNI show this post-colonial trend. However in some other Christian denominations attempts of decolonisation have caused fundamentalist revival movements. These issues have to be discussed in the theoretical paradigms of Post-colonialism and Orientalism.

Justification through History

Among historians of Thomas Christians there is a growing tendency to justify denominational and theological differences through an imaged past. Historians of Roman Catholic rites in Kerala are divided on the issue of Roman Catholic connection of Pre-Portuguese Kerala Christians. Many argue that these Christians were part of the Catholic Church. Others would vehemently speak of their Syrian connection or Autonomy. These divisions as we can observe today are not based on historical sources. They are engineered

by the needs of the present - either to justify the present congregational affiliations or projected ecclesial discipline. This tendency causes major problems in the historiography of Thomas Christians. Many historical projects funded and managed by the Christian denominations are bound to support their sectarian views. Even in the state funded universities these sectarian views are often reflected in various research projects and reports. Such differences will continue. So one has to be aware of it and one should have the honesty to admit it. Let them be presented as possibilities of historical interpretation. There can be no such thing as history - in - itself, independent of the interests, biases and rhetorical devices of the present. But for a Christian it is very difficult to admit such a pluralistic statement. He is trained to admit only monopolistic claims of truth! This is the major difficulty in the historiography of Thomas Christians. The narratives of Nambudiri connection of Nazranis also have to be interpreted and understood in this background of knowledge industry. It is a contested site of knowledge. A researcher working in this area needs more openness, tolerance, local knowledge and refined tools of research fashioned in the current state of the art.