

St. Thomas tradition in India: a critical inquiry

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Introduction:

We, as Indian Christians are aware of the tradition of St. Thomas Christianity in India. Though the place of initial arrival of Apostle Thomas in India is debatable¹, the Indian Christian community at large strongly holds on to the bigger idea that St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Lord Jesus Christ, brought Christianity to India. However, this strongly held belief by the Christians has been dismissed by scholars in the past on the grounds of insufficient historical basis.² On the other hand, thinkers such as Tisserant, whose principal sources are the Acts of Thomas and some patristic and medieval references, strongly defend the Apostle Thomas coming, arguing both for the North Indian and the South India apostolates.³

The pivotal idea one needs to remember while doing a historical inquiry is that a lack of historical evidence does not necessarily imply lack of historical validity. It

¹ As per the 'Western Tradition', Thomas followed the well-established 'Silk Route' to reach Northern India, sometime in the middle of the First Century A.D., where he converted many to Christianity, suffered martyrdom in the South and was in the end buried there; Later, his mortal remains were transferred to the West (Edessa – at that time, an important center of the Syrian Church). Over against this view, the 'Indian Tradition' holds that Apostle Thomas came via sea in 52 A.D., converted high caste Hindu families, crossed over to China and returned to India, organized the Christians of Malabar under some guides (priests) and finally suffered martyrdom near/on the Little Mount (See, Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. I, 25, 29). The difference of this two traditions came into further highlight when Pope Benedict XVI, while addressing a gathering in St. Peter's Square on September 27, 2006, recalled that Apostle Thomas first evangelized Syria and Persia and then penetrated as far as Western India from where Christianity also reached South India." (Ananthakrishnan G, 'Thomas Visit Under Doubt' in Times Of India (TOI), Dec. 26, 2006.

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Thomass-visit-under-doubt/articleshow/926822.cms>, accessed on January 23, 2015)

² For Instance, Rev. J. Hough (*History of Christianity in India: From the Commencement of the Christian Era*, London: R.B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1859, vol. I, 30f) denies that any Apostle was ever in India; A.C. Brunell (*Some Pahlavi Inscriptions in South India*, Mangalore: 1873, 4), held that based on a legend, travelers began calling some sect of Christians in India as St. Thomas Christians; G.Milne-Rae (*The Syrian Church in India*, London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1892, 24f), rejected the idea of St. Thomas' coming further east than Afghanistan. Similarly, John W. Kaye (*Christianity in India: An Historical Narrative*, London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1859, 4) considers it a worthless legend. More recently, Ishwar Sharan (*The Myth of Saint Thomas and the Mylapore Shiva Temple*, New Delhi: 2010, 146) though not a trained Scholar, holds the legend that St. Thomas came to India is not true.

³ Quoted in A.M.Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India, vol. I: From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (Upto 1542)*, (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1984), 24

may simply be the case of lack of ‘accessibility to the extant sources’ or ‘of complete destruction/no further existence’ of the relevant historical proofs.⁴

This paper aims to explore and analyse some of the available evidence regarding the St. Thomas tradition in India and to develop a deeper and informed understanding regarding this important subject – important, not only as it relates to the historical person of Apostle Thomas but also as it relates to the Indian Church, who claim their existence in the Indian subcontinent since the last two millennia.

I. Evidence from outside India

1. Acts of Thomas – a non-canonical book, the Acts of Thomas (AT)⁵ consists of thirteen Acts, which was written around 200-225 A.D.⁶ It offers us with some important insights regarding the presence of St. Thomas in India. Commenting upon its importance for St. Thomas tradition in India, Kuriakose holds that while the Acts of Thomas is mainly legendary, it ought not to lead us to ignore the instances of confirmable historical information embedded therein.⁷

⁴ This also happens to be the case with St. Thomas tradition in India to a considerable extent; It was soon after the well-known ‘*Synod of Diamper*’ held in 1599, that a significant number of the historical documents/manuscripts of the St. Thomas Christians (or Syrian Christians) were destroyed {in order to purge the native church in South India (Thomas Christians) of the elements that were considered unacceptable according to the Latin Roman Catholic Church}. See, Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, ‘Syriac Manuscripts in India, Syriac Manuscripts from India’, in (Hugoye: *Journal of Syriac Studies*, XV.2, 2012), vol. 15.1, 283; Michael Geddes, *The History of the Church of Malabar: From the time of its being First Discovered by the Portuguese in the Year 1501.* trans., Michael Geddes, (London: Sam. Smith & Benj. Walford, 1694), 245; Klaus Koschorke, *Transcontinental Links in the History of Non-Western Christianity*, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz GmbH & Co. KG, 2002), 132.

⁵ I have used the online version hosted by ‘*The Gnostic Society Library*’ originally published in 1924 at Oxford by Clarendon Press. The online source can be accessed at - <http://www.gnosis.org/library/actthom.htm>. In this research paper, I have used the short form ‘**AT**’ for referring to it.

⁶ This is a traditionally accepted date of writing for the Acts of Thomas (Harold W. Attridge, ‘Acts of Thomas’ in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, 531). See also, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/sermons-essays-books/noncanonical-literature/acts-of-thomas>, accessed on January 23, 2015. Kuriakose gives him a slightly earlier date of 180-230 A.D. References to ‘Acts of Thomas’ by Epiphanius of Salamis also show that it was in circulation in the 4th Century A.D.

⁷ M.K.Kuriakose, *History of Christianity in India: Source Material*, (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2011), 2

The AT describes about how Apostle Thomas decides to go to India. During the first Century A.D., while the Church was still located in Jerusalem, the Apostles seriously considered about how they could carry out the 'Great Commission' given by their Lord, who had so to say, taken them by complete surprise by raising back to life and appearing to them by passing through a closed door. In line with this, the AT talks about how the apostles divided the world for missionary endeavours.

The account records in AT 1:1, *"According to the lot, therefore, India fell unto Judas Thomas, which is also the twin: but he would not go, saying that by reason of the weakness of the flesh he could not travel, and 'I am an Hebrew man; how can I go amongst the Indians and preach the truth?'"*⁸ The AT continues to talk about how Jesus appears to Thomas by night and says, *"Fear not, Thomas, go you to India and preach the word there, for my grace is with you."* But the Apostle would not obey, saying: *"Where you would send me, send me, but elsewhere, for to the Indians I will not go."*⁹ Based on what we know about the apostle from the Gospel accounts, this kind of a response as mentioned here in AT, should not surprise us.¹⁰ It is evident that the Apostle had very fixed ideas and liked clear-cut definitions and very compelling evidence, in order to move him to any action. However, once he was convinced, it would lead him to serious action in line with his conviction.

The AT records about how Apostle Thomas meets a man named Abbanes, an agent of King Gundaphar¹¹ and decides to go with him to India.¹² After the Apostle

⁸ AT 1:1

⁹ AT 1:1

¹⁰ For instance, we find Thomas urging his fellow disciples to go and die with Christ (John 11:16); Thomas also interrogates the disciples regarding how precisely (the disciples) are to follow him (John 14:5) and finally it again Thomas, who refuses to believe on the resurrection of Christ, unless he would first verify it himself (John 20:25).

¹¹ King Gundaphorus or Gundaphar is a historical personage who reigned over a part of India in the First century after Christ. His coins bearing his name have also been discovered.

¹² AT 1:3, 'The Acts of Thomas', <http://www.gnosis.org/library/actthom.htm>, accessed 23 January, 2015

arrives in India, the King Gundaphar appoints him to build a palace for him. However, the Apostle frees himself of this burden and begins to tour the countryside, teaching and preaching about his master, Lord Jesus Christ.¹³ Few months later, the King Gundaphar asks about the progress of the work assigned to the Apostle and though the King is angry with Apostle Thomas, but when his brother dies and the Apostle Thomas raises him back to life, the brother narrates about the beauty of the palace Thomas has built in heaven.¹⁴

At this point, King receives baptism. Then, the Apostle moves to another Kingdom at the invitation of its King Mazdai.¹⁵ Here too, he makes many converts, but at last, he is stabbed by the King's orders, while he was on top of a hill.¹⁶ Regarding this, historian Brown says that though we cannot have confidence in the historical reliability of each and every incident recorded in the Acts of Thomas, it contains certain historical facts and figures like the mention of King Gundaphar, an Indian king.¹⁷

Pointing out to the purpose of its writing, Brown says that there were Christians in India, when the Acts was written and the stories explain its link with the Church at Edessa and demonstrated its apostolic outreach.¹⁸ Regarding AT, Mundadan says, "the tradition (of St. Thomas coming to India), as it is found in the Acts of Thomas and in the witness of various authors and churches make this possibility highly probable."¹⁹ With all historical facts mentioned in AT, which also

¹³ AT 2:19, *The Acts of Thomas*, Op. Cit.

¹⁴ AT 2:23, *The Acts of Thomas*, Op. Cit.

¹⁵ AT 7:62, *The Acts of Thomas*, Op. Cit.

¹⁶ AT 13: 168, *The Acts of Thomas*, Op. Cit.

¹⁷ Leslie Brown, *The Indian Christian of St. Thomas*, (London, Cambridge University Press, 1956), 43-45.

¹⁸ Brown, Op. Cit., 43-45.

¹⁹ Mundadan, Op. Cit., 25

corroborates with the witness of other writings that we shall see in the following headings make a very compelling case for the reliability of the St. Thomas tradition in India.

2. Witness from Early Christian Writings:

a. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Teaching of the Apostles) – it was written around 225 to 250 A.D. and is perhaps the first known document that mentions about Apostle Thomas. It was produced in Syriac and is a compilation of ethical and legal regulations²⁰, which was widely used for Christian missionary education in Ancient Persia.²¹ Mentioned in here is how the apostles of Jesus Christ had gone to spread the gospel to the world: *“India and all its own countries and those bordering on it, even to the farther sea, received the Apostles’ Hand of the Priesthood from Judas Thomas, who was Guide and Ruler in the church, which he built and ministered.”*²²

Since Didascalia has been considered part of the writings knowns as the ‘Church Orders’ and which also became the basis of first six books of the ‘Apostolic Constitutions’ (written at the end of Third Century)²³, it is reasonable to believe that its testimony concerning Apostle Thomas was also accepted by the contemporary ecclesiastical authorities, which again points to the genuineness of the St. Thomas tradition.

b. St. Gregory of Nazianzus – he served as a bishop of Constantinople (c. 379 - 383 A.D.), who was also popular as the most accomplished rhetorical stylist of the

²⁰ D.C.Parker, *The Living Texts of the Gospels*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 58

²¹ Jun Li, ‘Christianity and Education in Asia’, in Felix Wilfred, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 315.

²² S. H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, vol. I: Beginnings to 1500*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998; Online edition -

http://books.google.co.in/books?id=5r0dBAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false, accessed on 23 January, 2015

²³ John Dominic Crossan, *The Cross that Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1988), 73.

patristic age.²⁴ He refers to Thomas, the Apostle, in a Homily number 33, where it is written²⁵:

“What? were not the Apostles strangers amidst the many nations and countries over which they spread themselves, that the Gospel might penetrate into all parts, that no place might be void of the triple light or deprived of that truth, so that the cloud of ignorance among them even who sit in darkness and the shadow of death might be lifted? ... Peter indeed may have belonged to Judea; but what had Paul in common with the gentiles, Luke with Achaia, Andrew with Epirus, John with Ephesus, Thomas with India, Mark with Italy?”

This section talks about how the Apostles took up the mission of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. The manner in which the author presents these facts clearly implies that he presumes his audience to already know about them. Thus, St.

Gregory's writing stand as an early witness to an Indian apostolate of St. Thomas.

c. St. Ambrose of Milan (c.340-397 A.D.) – He was born in 340 A.D. and was chosen to serve as the Bishop of Milan 374; who is also known as one of the four original doctors of the Roman Catholic Church.²⁶ In his own words²⁷,

“The Apostles being sent without delay, according to the saying of our Lord Jesus: Going therefore, teach ye all nations (Matt. xxviii. 19). Even those kingdoms which were shut out by rugged mountains became accessible to them, as India to Thomas, Persia to Matthew. This also (viz., the internal peace) expanded the power of the empire of Rome over the whole world, and appeased dissensions and divisions among the peoples by securing peace, thus enabling the Apostles, at the beginning of the church, to travel over many regions of the earth.”

²⁴Gregory of Nazianzen, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/gregory_naz, accessed on 25 January, 2015. The same site shares about how Gregory of Nyssa, his brother St. Basil, and Basil's best friend Gregory of Nazianzus were collectively called a the 'Cappadocian Fathers'. They were a major force in the triumph of the Athanasian position at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

²⁵ Quoted from the Original Source in A.E.Medlycott, *India and the Apostle: An Inquiry with a critical analysis of the Acta Thomas*, (Piscataway Township, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2005 Reprint Edn.), 42. Online Edn. -

<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=1X5c2hI3zqEC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>, accessed on 24 January, 2015.

²⁶ Philip Schaff and Rev. Henry Wallace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Father, vol. X*, (NY: Cosimo Inc., 2007), xv. Online link -

<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=SzhblcbRxewC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>, accessed on 25, January 2015. He is also known to have a profound impact on St. Augustine's life.

²⁷ Quoted in Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas*, 44. Online link:

<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=1X5c2hI3zqEC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>, accessed on 24 January, 2015. The Original Source not available online is – [Opera omnia edidit Paulus Angelus Ballerini, Mediolani, 1876, tom. ii., Enarratio in Psalm. xlv. § 21, cols. 389-390.]

This section talks about how the Apostles recognizing the opportunity offered to them by the socio-political situation in the Roman Empire, moved out to fulfil the great commission of Jesus Christ. In order to fulfil this call, they did not even allow the tough geographical conditions posed by the mountains as it is the case in travelling to India via the 'Silk Route'. The particular mention of the Apostle's name in connection to India in this quotation again stand as a very strong witness for the Indian apostolate of Apostle Thomas.

d. St. Jerome (c.345-420 A.D.) – he was a born in Italy and is known as Christian abbot, scholar and translator of the bible.²⁸ Being invited by St. Gregory of Nazianzus, he went to Constantinople before the close of 379 and there he also acted as Pope's secretary.²⁹ In his writing, called the '*Epistle of St. Jerome*', he says,

“He (Jesus) was indeed at one and the same time with the apostles and with the angels....so, afterwards He was with Thomas in India, with Peter in Rome, with Paul in Illyricum, with Titus in Crete, with Andrew in Achaia.³⁰

Considering the depth of Jerome's knowledge about various aspects of the Church life and the fact he was well-travelled in the regions of both of the Eastern as well as Western Church, it is quite reasonable to believe upon the authenticity of this information regarding Apostle Thomas' coming to India.

²⁸ Janet Timbie, 'St. Jerome' in William M. Johnston, ed., *Encyclopedia of Monasticism: A-L*, (Illinois, Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000), 694. Online Link - <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=GfC0TDkJJNgC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>, accessed on 26 January, 2015. He was also a monk and his original works on asceticism as well as his exegetical works are informed by his monastic experiences in the East and the West.

²⁹ Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas*, 44. Online Edn. - <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=1X5c2hI3zqEC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>, accessed on 24 January, 2015

³⁰ Letter LIX to Marcella by St. Jerome. NPNF2-06. *The Principal Works of St. Jerome*, trans., W.H.Fremantle, (Canterbury: npub., 1892), np. Online Link - <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=p-llH1Z4JnMC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>, accessed on 25 January, 2015.

e. St. Paulinus of Nola (354-431 A.D.) – he was a Latin poet, a letter-writer and a convert to the Christian faith.³¹ He served as a Bishop of Nola in Italy, starting with 409 A.D.³² He was also contemporary of St. Augustine of Hippo as well as St. Jerome. Regarding St. Thomas tradition he said in 431 A.D.³³ the following words,

“So God, bestowing His holy gifts in all lands, sent His apostles to the great cities of the world. To Patrians, He sent Andrew, to John the charge of Ephesus he gave of Europe and Asia, their errors to repel with effulgence of light. Parthia receives Matthew, India Thomas, Libya Thaddeus and Phrygia Philip.”³⁴

This quotation again comes from a credible leader such as a bishop of the Western Church. It is possible that he may have uncritically taken these ideas from someone else. However, considering a significant number of intellectuals writing about St. Thomas’ coming to India during the same period, it does not allow a serious researcher to completely deny a strong plausibility of the coming of St. Thomas to India.

f. Ephrem of Edessa - a deacon saint and a poet, who lived in Edessa in the last decade of his life from 363 to 373 A.D. and composed a hymn in honour of St. Thomas, whose relics were venerated in a shrine there. In one of his Stanzas, he writes, *“Blessed art thou, like unto the solar ray from the great orb; thy grateful dawn India’s painful darkness doth dispel. Thou the great lamp, one among the Twelve,*

³¹ Dennis E. Trout, *Paulinus of Nola: Life, Letters, and Poems*, (LA, California: Uni. Of California Press, 1999), 29ff. Online Link -

http://books.google.co.in/books?id=Y8z027_xmsIC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false, accessed on 27 January, 2015

³² Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas*, 46. Online Edn. -

<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=1X5c2hl3zqEC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>, accessed on 24 January, 2015

³³ Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkiet, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 162. Online Link -

<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=UGpr2KsbS94C&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>, accessed on 27 January, 2015.

³⁴ Witness for An Apostle: The Evidence for St. Thomas in India in ‘Road to Emmaus’, Journal of Orthodox Faith and Culture, OR, Portland, vol. VI, No. 2 (#21). 55. Online Link -

http://www.roadtoemmaus.net/back_issue_articles/RTE_21/WITNESS_FOR_AN_APOSTLE.pdf, accessed on 20 November, 2014

with oil from the Cross replenished, India's dark night flooded with light."³⁵ Similarly, in 42nd of his hymns called '*Carmina Nisibina*', Ephrem talks about how the Apostle was put to death in India and his remains brought to Edessa subsequently.³⁶ Medlycott calls him a prolific writer of the era of the Church Fathers, who wrote numerous works.³⁷ This leads us to take his witness regarding St. Thomas with serious consideration that point to St. Thomas apostolate in India.

g. St. Gregory, Bishop of Tours (c. 538-593 A.D.) – he was a Gallo-Roman historian, who assumed the Episcopal seat in Tours in 573 A.D.³⁸ In his creation entitled '*De Gloria Martyrum*', a work that he revised in 590 AD, shortly before his death in 593 A.D., he writes,

"Thomas, the Apostle, according to the history of his passion, is declared to have suffered in India. After a long time his holy remains (corpus) was taken into a city which they called Edessa, in Syria, and there buried. Therefore, in that Indian place where he first rested there is a monastery and a church of wonderful size, and elaborately adorned and designed...This, Theodore, who has been to the place, narrated to us."³⁹

Medlycott argues on the veracity of this information the basis of two main reasons.⁴⁰ One, during that period, there was no dearth of pilgrims, whose piety urged them to visit far and distant places, where the mortal remains of God's faithful servants was laid. If he had furnished incorrect information, his writings would have been immediately challenged. In fact, as St. Gregory himself shares, he sent Deacon

³⁵ Quoted in Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas*, 26. Online Edn. -

<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=1X5c2hI3zqEC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>, accessed on 24 January, 2015

³⁶ Medlycott, *India and the Apostle: An Inquiry with a critical analysis of the Acta Thomas*, (London: Ballantyne, Hanson and Co., 1905 [Digitalized Version]), 27-28.

³⁷ Ibid., 20.

³⁸ Venantius Fortunatus, *Poems to Friends*, trans., Joseph Pucci, Indiana, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2010), 24. Online link -

http://books.google.co.in/books?id=XIHhNGSQ_ZwC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false, accessed on 26 January, 2015

³⁹ Medlycott, *India and the Apostle*, 71-72. Online Edn. -

<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=1X5c2hI3zqEC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>, accessed on 24 January, 2015

⁴⁰ Ibid., 73-74.

Aguilph to Rome in 590 A.D., another deacon likewise visited Jerusalem. In the same way, Theodore came from India and met Gregory to give him the interesting historical details. Second, the climatic conditions, where the body of St. Thomas is laid, are very dissimilar to that found in Edessa. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that Theodore must have offered him the correct information.

3. International Travellers:

a. Pantaneus – Early Church Father Eusebius, who served as a Bishop of Caesarea (c. 314 to 339 A.D.) mentions in one of his writings about a man named Pantaneus, who visited India about 180 A.D. and there he found a Gospel of Matthew written in Hebrew language, left with the Christians there by St. Bartholomew.⁴¹

Jerome, a well-travelled and renowned scholar, writing during the same era also writes about Pantaneus in his letter 'LXX', mentioning the details further and talks about a group of Indian delegation coming to Alexandria and having been impressed with the scholarship of Pantaneus asked Demetrius, the bishop of Alexandria, to send him to India *"to preach Christ to the Brahmins and philosophers there."*⁴²

Though there is a school of thought (such as Mingana)⁴³ that argues that the actual country of Pantaneus visit was not India but was in Abyssinia or Arabia Felix, Historian Stephen Neill rightly points out, "But there is little to be said in favour of this

⁴¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book V, Chapter 10. See, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.x.xi.html>, accessed on 29, September 2014

⁴² Kuriakose, *History of Christianity in India*, 4; See also, Philip Schaff and Rev. Henry Wallace (Ed), *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers (Second Series)*, Vol. VI – Jerome Letters and Select Works, (NY: Cosimo Books, Reprint 2007), 150.

⁴³ Well known historian on Eastern Christianity, Mingana is one of those who deny that Pantaneus went to India. He says, "It will be a matter of surprise if any responsible author will even mention Pantaneus in connection with India." Quoted in Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. I, 117.

view. When ships in hundreds were going from Egypt to South India, it is unlikely that any one in Alexandria would be the victim of such a confusion."⁴⁴

Regarding this, John Stewart observes, "Notwithstanding the high reputation of Dr. Mingana and his well-known erudition, one ventures to differ from him in the conclusion to which he has come."⁴⁵ Similarly, Moffett holds that Pantaneus's pupils Clement and Origen wrote about India as if they knew more of that land than passing myths and in no way confused it with Arabia or Ethiopia.⁴⁶ Moreover, another point to be noted in this regard is that Jerome mentions about Pantaneus invitation was meant to preach to the Brahmans in addition to others, who were not located anywhere else except India during that period. Even if we consider the fact that First Century India was much bigger in area in comparison with the modern India, still the above description about India is impossible to be confused with any other part of the world.

Pantaneus visit to India is of great importance as it informs us of the presence of a Christian community in South India and how they took the task of preaching the Gospel to Brahmans and philosophers in India as a serious responsibility. It also points out that within the Christian community in India, there were Christians from the Jewish origin, who could have followed the Gospel of Matthew, left with them in the first century during the visit of St. Bartholomew. This fact, corroborates with the fact mentioned in Acts of Thomas that among the first converts made by Thomas in the

⁴⁴ Stephen Neill, *History of Christianity in India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 39

⁴⁵ John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise: Story of a Church on Fire*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clarke, 1928), 106-107.

⁴⁶ Moffett, *History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500*, Online Edn.

http://books.google.co.in/books?id=5r0dBAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false, accessed on 23 January, 2015

kingdom of Gondaphorus in North West India was also a Jewish flute girl who knew Hebrew language.⁴⁷

In this way, the story of Panteneus visiting India is a strong independent witness both to the fact of St. Thomas tradition in India as well as to the history of Christian community right from the First Century A.D., as opposed to the idea argued by some, who relate the Christian presence in India with the arrival of Thomas of Cana⁴⁸ in the Fourth Century (c. 345 A.D.).

b. Marco Polo - he was another very important source of historically reliable information, who visited India during the thirteenth century A.D. He gives a vivid description of his visit to the tomb of St. Thomas, the Apostle. According to him,

“The body of Messer Saint Thomas, the Apostle lies in this province of Maabar at a certain little town having no great population; ‘tis place, where few traders go, because there is very little merchandise to be get there, and it is a place not very accessible. Both Christians and Saracens, however, greatly frequent it with pilgrimage...the Christians, who go tither in pilgrimage take the earth from place, where the Saint was killed, and give a portion to anyone who is sick of a quartan or tertian fever; and by the power of God and of Saint Thomas, the sick man in incontinently cured. The earth should I tell you is red.”⁴⁹

The above picturesque description, as is also visible in the rest of his writings, makes it a compelling case that supports St. Thomas tradition in South India, even as he writes about the details as an eye witness account and of not just by getting information from someone else. This again points to the St. Thomas Christianity in India.

⁴⁷ AT, 1:5,

⁴⁸ Thomas of Cana was a wealthy merchant who had probably come to trade in South India; it is said that the King he met, liked him and when he expressed a wish to acquire land and make a settlement, the King readily acceded to his request and let him purchase land, then unoccupied, at Cranganore. Under the king's orders Thomas soon collected a number of Christians from the surrounding country, which enabled him to start a town on the ground marked out for his occupation.
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14678a.htm#VIII>.

⁴⁹ Hugh Murray, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, Tweeddale Court, and Simpkin, Marshall & Co., MDCCCLXV (1865), 302

II. Witness from Indian Tradition:

There are several traditions in India regarding the coming of St. Thomas. These traditions include oral, living communities and written documents about the work of St. Thomas in India.⁵⁰ As mentioned earlier, the commonly held tradition by Indian Christians differs in the details regarding 'how' the Apostle Thomas arrived in India. According to this tradition which is prevalent mostly in South India, Apostle Thomas first landed in South India, in the ancient port of Muziris, in circa 50 or 52 A.D., where as it is claimed, he founded seven churches.⁵¹ Without looking at the evidence from India itself, the search for the validity of St. Thomas tradition in India will not be complete. We therefore turn to explore the evidence available locally in India. These evidences are both oral and traditional as well as historical.

1. Ancient Songs:

Mundadan gives the chief local sources in which the best known are '*Rabban Pattu*' and '*Margam Kali Pattu*'.⁵² '*Rabban Pattu*' (or Song of Thomas) is a wedding song, popular in Kerala, which dates Thomas' arrival to India to 50 A.D.⁵³ Moffett says that this song has been traced in writing as early as 1601 (or 1101) and beyond that date to an oral tradition handed down in one family line for 48 generations.⁵⁴ Regarding this, Mundadan says that the modern redactor of '*Rabban Pattu*' regards

⁵⁰ C.B. Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1961), 8.

⁵¹ Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 30

⁵² *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵³ John C. England, *The Hidden History of Christianity in Asia: The Churches of the East Before 1500*, (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1996), 119.

<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=WF80oVQyJowC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>, accessed on 26 January, 2015

⁵⁴ Moffett, *Op. Cit.*

himself to be the 48th successor of the first priest of his family, who was allegedly ordained by Thomas, the apostle himself.⁵⁵

'Margam Kali Pattu' (or The Song of the Way), which also accompanied a sacred dance, described to have introduced into Kerala of the *'marga'* or the path of Christian way of worship.⁵⁶ Apart from this, we have other sources such as *Veeradian Pattu*, some of the Hindu accounts such as the *Keralopathies* and a Tamil account about Kandappa Raju also have mentions about Apostle Thomas.⁵⁷

Regarding the validity of these evidences, Moffett rightly says that though these are not tangible and datable evidence as preferred by the Historians, but songs and poetry of a living community handed down from generation to generation, sometimes offer deeper insights behind the truth of ethnic and religious origins than manuscripts and damaged inscriptions.⁵⁸

2. Living Communities

R.E. Frykenberg says that India has peculiar forms of historical understanding that they have produced, preserved and perpetuated by themselves, in that the leading families, who claimed descent from the Brahmins and Nayar lineages, have preserved oral tradition and Palm-leaf documents, which supplies the details regarding their immigration, habitation and interestingly the places visited by Apostle Thomas.⁵⁹ Frykenberg says that the *Vamshavalies* (historical lineages) of many St.

⁵⁵ Mundadan, Op. Cit., 33

⁵⁶ England, Op. Cit., 119

⁵⁷ Mundadan, Op. Cit., 30

⁵⁸ Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. I: Beginnings to 1500*. Online Edn. - Online Edn. http://books.google.co.in/books?id=5r0dBAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false, accessed on 23 January, 2015

⁵⁹ R.E.Frykenberg, 'India' in Adrian Hastings (ed.), *A World History of Christianity*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 148

Thomas Christians show that these families⁶⁰ have a succession of priests about 60 or 70 unbroken generations, going back to the Apostle Thomas.⁶¹

Some of the oral traditions have been in circulation in the form of proverbs. Podipara, a notable historian of the St. Thomas tradition, says that both Christian and Hindu tradition affirm that when St. Thomas converted some Brahmins from Palayur, the rest of the community left to Vemmanat, a place located near Palayur. While leaving, they said *'the next bath at Vemmanat'*, which has become a proverb. Even today the Brahmins in the neighbourhood of Palayur do not eat or drink, nor do they bath in the Palayur locality.⁶² All these traditions that trace their origin to ministry of St. Thomas in India, are again a very strong evidence to the St. Thomas tradition in India, which cannot be denied.

3. Presence of St. Thomas Stone Crosses:

Stone bas-relief crosses such as the one found in the Church in Mylapore (Church of the St. Thomas Mount) and another one in a church in Kottayam in addition to few others, are considered to belong to the St. Thomas Christianity in India. They bear the inscription *"In the punishment of the cross was the suffering of this one, who is the true Christ, God above and Guide ever pure."*⁶³ These crosses represent resurrection through its various symbolisms. The language used in the inscription is Pahlavi and Burnell assigns them to the Sixth or Seventh Century A.D.⁶⁴ However, this is just one of the scholarly views. The association of these crosses with St. Thomas was attested and documented in *'Jornada'*, written by Gouvea, which is a

⁶⁰ Such as Kalli, Kalikav, Kottakali, Koyakkam, Madeipur, Muttodal, Nedumpalli, Pakalomattam, Pnakkamattam and Snakarapuri.

⁶¹ Frykenberg, 'India', 149

⁶² Quoted in Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. I, 33

⁶³ Kuriakose, Op. Cit., 9

⁶⁴ A.C.Burnell, *On Pahlavi Inscription in South India*, (Mangalore: Stolz & Hirner, 1873), 6f

sixteenth century document.⁶⁵ Interestingly, Gouvea writes about the veneration of the Cross at Cranganore and mentions it as "Cross of Christians". He also writes about the tradition that this "Cross of Christians" was placed at Cranganore by St. Thomas the Apostle.⁶⁶

Similarly, crosses have been also found on gravestones in Nanjing in China.⁶⁷ According to Baum, this may be because of the missionary outreach to the East made possible by the 'Silk Route'.⁶⁸ As these crosses have been venerated by all St. Thomas Christians from ancient times and since the palaeographical dating of ancient inscription is not a fool proof method, their connection with the Apostle Thomas cannot be completely ignored as a myth.

4. Ancient Manuscripts and Documents:

In the recent years, historical manuscripts and other documents of historical correspondence written in Malayalam and Syrian, have been re-discovered from the five key manuscript libraries located in Kerala, South India.⁶⁹ The key historical documents such as *Thrissur Syr. 22*, *Thrissur Syr. 64*, *Piramadam Syriac 14*, *MS Trivandrum Syr. 18*, *Mannanam Syr 28* and other documents of historical correspondences such as '*Letters related to the Chaldean movement under the governorship of Thomas Prammackal*' (1787-1799) and *MS Mannanam Mal. 3, f.6r* in addition to few others, all testify to a very strong link that existed between the Syrian

⁶⁵ Ancient crosses of India, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_crosses_of_India

⁶⁶ <http://www.nasrani.net/2008/02/29/analogical-review-on-st-thomas-cross-the-symbol-of-nasranis/#ixzz3II30eKFD>, accessed on 26 January, 2015

⁶⁷ Gudrum Lowner, Christian Art and Architecture in Asia in Felix Wilfred. (Ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2014), 460.

⁶⁸ Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 78

⁶⁹ For a detailed study, please see - Istvan Perczel, 'Some New Documents on the Struggle of the Saint Thomas Christians to Maintain the Chaldaean Rite and Jurisdiction' in *Orientalia Christiane Journal*, https://www.academia.edu/5266468/Some_New_Documents_on_the_Struggle_of_the_Saint_Thomas_Christians_to_Maintain_the_Chaldaean_Rite_and_Jurisdiction

Church in South India with the Chaldean Church in Syria. Based on these historical records, it is quite plausible to conclude that this link was first established at the coming of St. Thomas the apostle of Christ – a link which continued and could not be completely eliminated even after the oppressive directives passed at after the Synod of Diamper in 1599 A.D.

III. Other Witnesses: In addition to Christian writers, historians and churchmen of the early Church, there are several others, who testify to the St. Thomas tradition in India. Some among them are:

1. Passio Thomae (c. 6th Cent. A.D.) – This document records that the body of St. Thomas after his martyrdom was buried with honour. And at the request of the Syrians, the Roman emperor Alexander (who defeated the King Zeres of Persia in 233 A.D.), ordered the body to be brought from India to Edessa.⁷⁰

2. Suleiman (c. 9th Cent. A.D.) – He was a Muslim traveller, who mentions ‘Bethuma’ (house of Thomas), which can be reached in 10 days from Quilon.⁷¹

3. Amr ibn Matta (c. 14th Cent. A.D.) – He wrote in 1340, “Thomas tomb is on the island of Meilan in India, on the right hand of the altar in his monastery.”⁷² It appears that the Hindu rulers of Vijayanagar also honored the grave.⁷³

IV. Further Historical Findings:

1. About King Gundaphar- Until 1834, King Gundaphar mentioned in the much discredited Acts of Thomas was taken to be a mythological character having no coherence with the actual history. However, the understanding changed, when an

⁷⁰ Mundadan, Op. Cit., 56.

⁷¹ Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 56-57.

⁷² Mundadan, Op. Cit., 57.

⁷³ Baum and Winkler, Op. Cit., 57

explorer shared a treasure of coins discovered by him in the same year. Among those coins, King Gundapar's name was inscribed both in Greek and Old Hindi Scripts and in different spellings.⁷⁴ Subsequently, more coins were discovered from the Punjab region, where he is supposed to have ruled in during the first Century A.D. As of today, we have surplus number of such coins found in a museum in Britain, as well as in India. Regarding these coins, Moffett says that further research has dated these coins as being from the First Century.⁷⁵

Moffett adds how near the end of the Nineteenth Century, more precise dating became possible, when a stone was discovered in the ruins of Peshawar. This stone has an inscription that not only mentions the name of King Gundaphar in Indo-Bactrian language, but also dates him precisely in the early first Century A.D., making him a contemporary of Apostle Thomas in exactly the same manner as much discredited Acts of Thomas has described him.⁷⁶ Though such an evidence does not directly confirm the tradition of St. Thomas in India, but it does pose a very convincing argument for it.

2. Topographical Feasibility – On studying about the ancient sea routes, we find that a vigorous trade route existed between Alexandria and the Indian ports, which increased dramatically in the Ptolemaic and Roman eras.⁷⁷ Regarding this, Strabo says, "When Gallus was prefect of Egypt (c. 26-24 B.C.), I accompanied him and ascended the Nile as far as Syene and the frontiers of Ethiopia and I learned that

⁷⁴ S. H. Moffett, *History of Christianity in Asia Vol. I: Beginnings to 1500*. Online Edn. - Online Edn. http://books.google.co.in/books?id=5r0dBAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false, accessed on 23 January, 2015

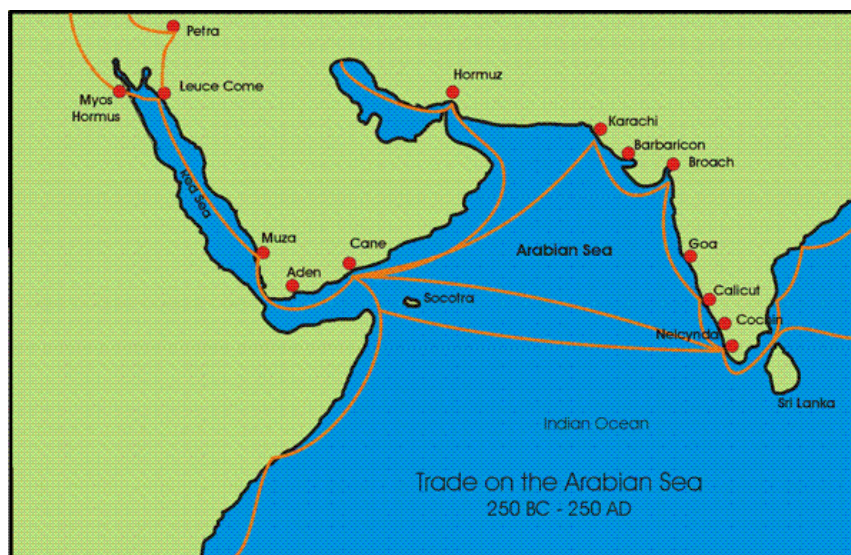
⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ronald E. Zitterkopf, 'Routes Through the Eastern Desert of Egypt' in *Expedition*, vol. 37. No. 2 (1995), 41.

as many as one hundred and twenty vessels were sailing from Myos Hormos to India.”⁷⁸

This period’s literary sources are complimented by the 1st Cent. A.D. navigation and entrepreneurial guide called the ‘*Periplus Maris Erythraei*’, which credits Hippalus (c. 1st Cent. B.C.) for the discovery of the direct route from the Red Sea to India over the Indian Ocean.⁷⁹ Stephen Neill points out that after the discovery of monsoon winds in the first century B.C., the sea route between the Mediterranean region and India via the Persian Gulf became well developed.⁸⁰ The following map⁸¹, shows this aspect very clearly.



Current Scholarship in History of Christianity in Asia believes that it would not have been unusual or even difficult for a first century Jew to take a ship for India.

⁷⁸ Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, vol. I, Loeb Classical Library Edn. 1917. (This text is under public domain). [Italics added.]

⁷⁹ J.W. McCrindle, *The Commerce and Navigation of the Erythrean Sea: Being translation of Periplus Maris Erhthrae*, (Calcutta: Thaker Spink & Co., 1879), 7. Online Edition - <http://google.co.in/books?id=jJ5DAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

⁸⁰ Stephen Neill, *The Story of the Christian Church in India and Pakistan*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 17.

⁸¹ Trade on the Arabian Sea, <http://nabataea.net/asea.html>, accessed on January 25, 2015

According to Moffett, “India was quite possibly more open to direct communication with the West in the first two Centuries of the Christian era than in any other period of history before the coming of the Portuguese, fifteen hundred years later.”⁸² Similarly, McDermott and Netland argue for a Christian presence in India since the first Century A.D. and assert that historians are now in consensus over Indian Christians having plausible claims to a first century planting of Christian Churches on the Asian sub-continent.⁸³

Based on these facts, it is reasonable to think that the historically well-established visit of Pantaneus might have been a consequence of earlier contacts between the two churches. Pantaneus also mentions about a copy of the Gospel of St. Mathew, written in Hebrew, that he found during his visit to India in 180 A.D.⁸⁴ This points to the fact that there was a Christian community in India even before the end of the Second Century A.D. This is further verified by the discovery of large number of Roman coins in the port cities of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.⁸⁵

Conclusion:

Whatever may be the apparent differences over the point of Apostle’s first arrival in India (North or to the South of India), there are enough evidences to support the fact of St. Thomas’ coming to India. Based on all the available evidences, it is quite plausible to believe that St. Thomas, after preaching the Gospel in Gundaphar’s

⁸² Moffett, Op. Cit. Online Edn. -

http://books.google.co.in/books?id=5r0dBAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false, accessed on 23 January, 2015

⁸³ Gerald R. McDermott and Harold A. Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Evangelical Proposal*, (NY: OUP, 2014), 116-117.

⁸⁴ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book V, Chapter 10. See, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.x.xi.html>, accessed on 29, September 2014

⁸⁵ Charles Nienkirchen, ‘Holy History or Wholly Fiction: did the Apostle Thomas Evangelize India?’ in *Anthem*, Spring, 2014, 8. And also Article entitled ‘Project for Preserving the Manuscripts of Syrian Christians in India’, <http://www.srite.de/index?id=2&cikk=84>

kingdom in the North, must have moved on to the South, as all the available evidences and local traditions affirm, to serve the kingdoms of the South, until he was put to death near South Eastern part of South India, near erstwhile known city of Madras. It is also quite possible that after his death, part of his mortal remains were taken to Edessa at a later date, which explains the presence of St. Thomas tomb in more than one location. In the end, it can be said that if St. Thomas was an apostle to India, it is reasonable to believe that he preached the Gospel to the whole of India. Based on the cumulative evidence examined above, it can be stated that it makes indeed a very convincing case for the arrival and work of the Apostle Thomas in India during the First Century AD that cannot be easily denied.

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