



Social Impact of Synod of Diamper on Kerala Christians and Society

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ABSTRACT

The Synod of Diamper was started a new phase in the history of St.Thomas Christians of Kerala. It is probably the most famous episode in Indian Church History famous not as a model of an ecclesiastic assembly, but for the extraordinary nature of the same. Nobody could have dreamt of such an assembly under the Portuguese or Padroado¹ auspices with the intention of introducing several changes and innovations in the customs, manners and devotional practices of the ancient church in India. At last in the year 1599, in the heyday of Portuguese supremacy, the powerful Portuguese Archbishop Menezes of Goa came in person to Kerala, toured all the parishes, brought pressure on locals and held the famous or rather infamous Synod of Diamper² by which the Syrians were brought under the See of Goa.”³

The decrees of the Synod of Diamper were elaborately discussed by several historians.⁴ They touched almost all aspects of the Christian life social, religious, and political. The Synod condemned all errors, which had crept into their earthly life. The decrees of the Synod honored all saints and their relics. The decrees clearly gave an idea about the condition of the St.Thomas Christians before and after the Synod of Diamper.⁵ When all is said the fact remains that the decrees of the Session brought about far-reaching changes in the social and religious life of Kerala Christians.

Keywords: Indian Church History, Latinization , Portuguese supremacy, Synod of Diamper, Unscrupulous proceeding.

1. SYNOD OF DIAMPER AND ITS VALIDITY

When everything was ready the Synod met on 20th June 1599 at Diamper. It was a very large gathering attended by 133 priests, 20 deacons and sub deacons, and 660 lay representatives - in all 813 persons on the Syrian side. The proceedings of the Synod went on for eight days. It was a complete triumph for Menezes. But the whole thing was a most highhanded and unscrupulous proceeding, nobody would dispute. The acts and decrees of the Synod clearly touched all the aspects of life of the people. “This Council met together nine times successively.

After the Synod, the Archbishop made another visit to all churches whether he visited them earlier or not. The aim of this visit was implementation of the decrees of the Synod of Diamper. It was also decreed that all Syriac books were to be handed over to the Archbishop on his visit. Some of these were corrected by Roz and others burned by the Archbishop. Thus several valuable books perished in fire. Several manuscripts were also lost. Their colophons would probably have disclosed many details about the local history of the Malabar Syrians.⁶

Undoubtedly the Synod of Diamper of 1599 was a great turning point and one of the tragic events in the history of the church of St. Thomas Christians of India. Its effects were the following: (1) Their centuries old links with the Persian church came to an end; (2) The Padroado of the king of Portugal was enforced upon them; (3) They were brought forcibly under the jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic hierarchy and thus under the Roman Catholic Christendom; (4) The traditional authority of their Archdeacon was put an end to; (5) As a result of all these, not only heavy damages were done to the ecclesiastical heritages of the local church, to its liturgical, doctrinal, administrative, disciplinary, traditions, but also to the very existence and future of this church. Unpardonable bases were laid subjecting them to thorough Westernization, Latinization, unwanted internal quarrels, divisions and subdivisions

throughout the centuries till now and;(6) Its ecclesiastical and doctrinal stands were condemned as heretical and Nestorian and its indigenous customs and practices were labelled as pagan and unorthodox.⁷

Historians had given their own views and evaluations about the Synod of Diamper since the time of its meeting. These views and evaluations which had been expressed by most from different angles so far did not justify that the Synod was a valid one. However, a few from the Latin side of the Roman tradition tried to maintain the view that the Synod was valid.⁸

The views maintained by the historians from the side of the Roman Catholic traditions as a whole, till the middle of the present century were intended for justifying it. The views of the protestant historians were just opposite to this stand. The attitude of the Syro Malabar Roman Catholic historians had changed considerably from the time of the publication of research by Jones Thaliath's *The Synod of Diamper*. The attitude of the Malankara Orthodox church writers about the Synod was totally disappointing. Their attitude was one totally ignoring the Synod as a whole. From the time of the meeting of the Synod of Diamper one could see three standpoints adopted by historians in general. (a) Justifying it as a whole. (b) Some were critical but argue that it proved beneficial to the Malabar church. (c) Others totally rejected the Synod as invalid.⁹

Franzis Roz had raised certain technical objections against the Synod but he in fact had not questioned the very substance of its achievements. Roz seemed to have changed his views between 1606 and 1610 and began to think that all that Menezes did in Malabar had been approved by the Holy See.¹⁰ The Jesuit Bishops who followed him did not worry much about the legality of the Synod. The Carmelites who succeeded the Jesuits in the administration of the church of the St. Thomas Christians considered the Synod of Diamper a valid one worthy of all commendation.¹¹

But from the beginning of this century more and more scholars came forward with a different view. Prominent among them were Tisserent, Placid, Giamil, and Coussa.¹² According to Tisserent, "Never did Rome advocate any policy that would change the Byzantine, the Maronite or even the Chaldean rite in Mesopotamia into the Latin one; the acts of the Synod were never officially approved. Actually they were not in need of approval since the Synod that was only diocesan was not subject by law to Roma's scrutiny".¹³ According to Placid J. Podipara, Dom Menezes had no moral right to summon a Synod and force its decrees. Further there is no historical evidence to prove that the Holy See had approved the Synod. Two recent studies made in the 20th century served as an eye opener to these studies. In 1937 Gregorio Magno Antao of Goa and in 1952 Jonas Thaliath defended their contradictory stands regarding the Synod of Diamper through their dissertations on Canon Law.¹⁴ According to Mathias Mundadan the Synod was invalid from three angles- legal, documentary and historical.¹⁵

The validity of the Synod was questioned by several objective writers. According to them the whole procedure was conducted not according to the Canon Law and never approved by Rome. This Synod transferred the indigenous independent Malabar church into a dependent submissive community of the Church of Rome. Also the Synod severed the ties of the Malabar church with the Persian church and attached it to the Church of Rome.

2. Impact of the Synod of Diamper on the Social Conditions of the Thomas Christians – (On the basis of the Decrees of the Synod of Diamper).

As a historical document, the Decrees of the Synod of Diamper are valuable. Among other things, they extensively dealt with the morality and Christian living of the Thomas Christians. The session 9th of the Synod of Diamper contained 25 decrees concerning the reformation of customs. In this session, the Synod dealt with all aspects of the Christian life of the Malabarians. The decree spoke of the early conditions of St.Thomas Christians. The winds of change leased by Menezes through the disciplinary decrees of the Synod of Diamper had far reaching results,¹⁶ especially in social life of the St.Thomas Christians. The Acts and Decrees of the Synod would suffice to convince one what a radical change of the life pattern of the Christians was envisaged by it. The Synod of Diamper which in practice was the denial of the age long particular pattern of the life of the Christians of St.Thomas.¹⁷

Before the Synod of Diamper, the Thomas Christians had developed their own social customs in the midst of Hindus along with whom they lived. But it was not really applicable in Christian sense. They followed their social systems even from the beginning of the Christian life in India. But in 15th century or at the time of the coming of Portuguese, the Thomas Christians had followed many social practices like superstitions, simony, corruption, Hindu practices like untouchability, polygamy, and witchcraft.

All of these practices are against Christianity. The Portuguese tried to purify the St. Thomas Christians' social life. The Synod of Diamper was the culmination of this reformation. In the social field the Synod of Diamper was a milestone. The decrees of the Synod went on to forbid the St. Thomas Christians' social, ecclesiastical and religious practices, they were accustomed to.¹⁸ Scaria Zacharia (*Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diamper*, p 40-59) has noted in detail how the Synod of Diamper brought about several changes in the life style of the Thomas Christians, destroying the commonness they hitherto had with their neighbours of other faiths. The Synod of Diamper and its Decrees were revolutionizing facts in the 17th century history of the St. Thomas Christians. St. Thomas Christians' life was really inter related with Hindu practices.

The Decrees of the Synod opened the eyes of the Christians in Kerala. The first Decree of the Session IX illustrated a number of 'heathenish vanities' and 'dangerous superstitions', of which this bishopric was full. The Synod prescribed them strictly. The practices thus condemned were the following: superstitious washing of dead corpses and the bathing held by the family members if any body died in their families, giving rise to the children, taking thread out when they cut a cloth and taking two grains of 'Nellu' (paddy) back again, after they had measured and sold it.¹⁹

The question of untouchability was treated in 2nd decree.²⁰ Untouchability and washing for purifying oneself connected with it were also considered by the Synod to be superstitious. The Synod also declared that, those who kept the custom of untouchability with Nairs should be severely punished as superstitious followers of the heathen customs.²¹ It also condemned polygamy²², concubinage²³, child marriage²⁴ etc.

Before the Synod, the children born horoscopically at inauspicious times were either killed or thrown away. The Synod advised that such children should be found out and sheltered.²⁵ The Synod restored dignity of women in Christian society. Monogamy was insisted upon and instructed to uphold the sanctity of marriage, which was instituted as a sacrament of the church.

The Synod had done well in prohibiting witchcraft²⁶, ordeals and oaths²⁷ to deities etc. The Christians consulted witches before entering into a marriage contract, to recover from sickness and to have children etc. They were also forced to undergo ordeals by the non-Christian kings, by handling hot iron, by dipping their hands into boiling oil or swimming across rivers that were full of crocodiles etc. in order to prove their innocence. Sometimes they were asked to take oaths by the heathen deities. Therefore the Synod ordered that all those who consulted witches should be excommunicated, and the priest should not visit their houses and that those who agreed to ordeals etc. should be severely punished.²⁸

The stress on education given by Menezes was a landmark in the cultural advance of Christianity in Kerala. The Portuguese emphatically appealed to the Christian leaders that every church should conduct schools in the basic Christian tenets with object of their regular Christian formation.²⁹

The Synod severely criticized and banned certain inhuman activities which existed among the Thomas Christians. The Synod of Diamper also banned the immoralities such as slavery, concubine, polygamy, polyandry etc. The Synod admitted all people irrespective of caste distinction and abolished '*pulayakuli*'. It also accepted the females also with males for equal share of family property.³⁰

Another moral defect sought to be corrected by the Synod was the killing and wounding of one another on the occasion of the festival of Onam. There was the danger of the possibility of death in these games, and some might have actually died and many others wounded.³¹ Since there was proximate danger of injury and death, the Synod did well in prohibiting such games. But the Synod was wrong in commanding the Christians, under holy obedience and pain of excommunication, not to take part in Onam celebrations, or any other heathen festivity because of its connection with non-believers. This kind of prohibition served only to isolate the Christian community from the rest of the people.³²

The Synod very earnestly recommended it to all masters and fathers of families, to be very watchful over the lives and manners of their slaves and servants. The 18th decree³³ prohibited the selling of arrack and liquor in Christian inns in order to avoid disasters, murders etc., that resulted from the use of this alcoholic drink and to prevent the Christians from frequent communication with the heathens. The positive step taken by the Synod to prevent the bad consequences of alcoholism was praise worthy. The 19th Decree prescribed to use in selling and buying the standard weights that were being used in the locality or the region.

All the above-mentioned changes in the social field created some changes in the social life of the St.Thomas Christians, after the Synod of Diamper. The Portuguese influence which lasted for over a period of 150 years, affected several aspects of the life of the people. From the social and political point of view K.M.Panikker writes; ‘converts to Christianity enjoyed citizenship and no distinction based on colour or race was recognized. The main and central fact of their relations with Indian communities was the encouragement of inter-marriage’.³⁴

This description gave a clear picture of social situation which existed after the Synod of Diamper. According to L.W.Brown, the carpenters, metal smelters, blacksmiths and goldsmiths recognized no superiors except the priests of the Thomas Christians, and that the barbers were also under Christian protection.³⁵ Besides bearing arms during times of war, they were during peaceful times, expert traders and agriculturists. Their trade was chiefly responsible for the growth of Cochin. It was after Goa, the finest and the largest city on the Malabar coast. The Portuguese had created a world market for Malabar products. For the society, the Portuguese system of socialization was very effective.³⁶

The priests were held in great respect. The Christians gave food to the poor children who attended catechism. Even the Hindus had great respect for the cross and their votive offerings.³⁷

One of the resolutions of the Synod of Diamper aimed at reforming the educational system of the St.Thomas Christians. The foreigners gave more attention to the education of the society. Before the arrival of the Portuguese education was only given to the upper strata of the society. But after the coming of the Portuguese and Synod of Diamper, education became liberal to all. It was a great contribution of the Portuguese rule. The Portuguese founded a college at Angamaly and Cochin for the Education of Malabar Christians in the Roman faith. This institution spread knowledge of Latin and Portuguese. To learn Malayalam was compulsory. The Synod of Diamper took definite steps for the human development through education.

All the decrees of the Synod contained several teachings of the Portuguese. This was deemed necessary, because the Portuguese prelate considered that the education of the Syrian Christians savoured too much of Hindu traditions and practices. But the religious situation after the Synod was not at all peaceful. St.Thomas Christians clearly opposed the Jesuits and the Roman Catholics. The unique role of the Archdeacon lost its dignity and significance under the Latin system. It created a social problem between the St.Thomas Christians and Roman Catholics. It finally ended in the Coonen Cross Oath.

3. CONCLUSION

The Acts and Decree of Synod of Diamper very much affected the social life of the St.Thomas Christians. After the Synod the Portuguese tried to enforce all these decree upon the St.Thomas Christians. The Malabar Syrians disliked their Portuguese ecclesiastical superiors and their actions, not because they were Roman Catholics, but they interfered with their national culture and oriental liturgy. The Synod of Diamper was a great event to the Syrians who were virtually brought under the Catholic hold.

As Cardinal Tisserent states “Many decrees of the Synod of Diamper passed on to posterity as the canon law of the Syrians of Kerala. In the pre-Diamper period there was no encounter of cultures; on the contrary Persian Christianity that prevailed in Kerala was almost submerged into the local Hindu culture and lost its identity except its name. But the Synod forcefully attacked the pagan customs directly. The Synod encouraged the idea that all men and women are equal in the sight of God and had equal rights to sympathy and help. The Kerala Christians were reluctant to shed their caste identity and prejudices.”³⁸

But all these Decrees of the Synod were not practised in the society. The Synod of Diamper severally criticized the pagan practice and Hindu customs that existed among the St.Thomas Christians. But condemnation of mere social observances like Onam celebration isolated the Christians from the social life of the country causing great difficulties in social and even religious fields. The exaggerated statements of the Synod about the customs and practices of the Thomas Christians created a bad impression about them in Europe.

The important value of the Synod is that its decrees served as a historical account that brought to light many of the ancient practices of the Thomas Christians, and it served as the source of the later discipline of the church in India. At the same time the strict measures taken by Archbishop Menezes to burn and destroy ancient Syriac books and missals led to the destruction of documents about the history, customs, tradition and canonical discipline of the Thomas Christians. There were social as well as religious abuses in Malabar and the Synod took firm steps to correct

them. In this sense the good intention of Archbishop Menezes was to be appreciated. The decisions of the Synod to evangelize the low castes and to uplift their social status were praiseworthy.

Some influences of the Synod still exist. The Synod of Diamper caused the beginning of the administration of the diocese and parishes by the Bishop and the hierarchy was established. The Decrees of the Synod influenced the emergence of the present Christian culture of Kerala. In the social field, the Synod of Diamper created a new awareness. The Synod touched all areas of social degradation. It gave a separate identity to the Thomas Christians among the Hindus. They were taught equality of men before God. In short the acts and decrees of the Synod revolutionized the Kerala society of the 17th century, especially the social situation of the St.Thomas Christians.

ENDNOTES

1. *Padroado* is a system which meant that the churches in their dominions were under the suzerainty of the Portuguese.
2. As per the terms of the Agreement reached between the Archbishop and the Archdeacon, the latter had to agree to convene a Synod of St.Thomas Christians. Although many desired to have the Synod at Angamaly, the Archbishop was not in favour of that city. Reasons for selecting Diamper are given in the *Jornada*. The main reasons were: (a) it was a place within the territory of the king of Cochin; (b) Diamper was within short distance of the Portuguese ports of Cochin and Kodungallur; (c) Diamper at one time the seat of Bishopric and the residence of the Christian royal family that had once ruled the St.Thomas Christians; (d) the reason was that it was not a Nestorian centre and hence Menezes selected Diamper as the venue of the Synod, in order to rouse the feelings of others. Care was taken to jeopardize the ancient privileges of any church. Therefore Menezes decided to choose Diamper instead of Angamaly. (Jonas Thaliath, *The Synod of Diamper*, pp.26-27). The actual name of the place in Malayalam is “*Udayamperur*.” Diamper was a Portuguese abbreviation.
3. Thomas, P., “Religious Influence in Kerala History – Christian” in *Cochin Synagogue Quarter Centenary Celebration Publication (CSQCCP)*, p.120.
4. Gouvea’s *Jornada*; M.Geddes, *History of the Malabar from the time of 1501...* K.N.Daniel, *Udayamperur Sunahadosinte Kanonagal* (Malayalam), Scaria Zachariah, *Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diamper*, etc.
5. Ferroli D, S.J., *The Jesuits in Malabar*, pp.185-204. and Joseph Kuzhinjalil, *The Disciplinary Legislation of the Synod of Diamper* (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation), 1975.
6. Tisserent, *op.cit.*, p.24.
7. Varghese, T.I. (Fr) Dr., “*Different views about the Synod of Diamper (1599) maintained by the Historians*”, paper presented in the seminar on Synod of Diamper at Kottayam, Sophia centre. (1999, Nov 22), p.1.
8. John Ochanthuruthu, Dr, “*The Synod of Diamper and its Impact on Kerala church*” paper presented at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian unity, Kottayam, 1998, p.11.
9. Varghese, T.I., *op.cit.*, p.2.
10. *Ibid.*, p.153.
11. Mundadan, A.M., *History and Beyond*, p.140.
12. Giamil, S., *Genuinae Relations Inter Sedem Apostolicam et Assyriorum orientalium Seu Chaldaeorum Ecclesiam*, p.610; Tisserent, *op.cit.*, pp.65-68; Placid Podipara., *The Thomas Christians*, p.173; and Coussa, A., *Epitome Praelectionum de Jure Ecclesiastico Orientali*, Vol-III, p.219.
13. Tisserent, *op.cit.*, p.66.
14. Anato’s dissertation was published in 1952 called *De Synodi Diamperitanae Natura atque Decretis*, and Thaliath’s dissertation was published in 1958 called *Synod of Diamper*.
15. Mundadan, *op.cit.*, p.145- 148 ; *Indian Church History Review (ICHR)*, *op.cit.*, p. 20.
16. John, K.J., *The Road to Diamper*, p.181.
17. Perumalil, H.C & Hambye, E.R., *Christianity in India*, pp.97-98.
18. Philip Kuruvila, (Fr), *op.cit.*, p.24.
19. Joseph Kuzhinjalil, *The Disciplinary Legislation of the Synod of Diamper*, (unpublished Doctoral dissertation), pp.413-14. But in the washing of the dead body and the bathing of the members of family of the deceased, there is nothing superstitious. They have only purificatory and hygienic value. But the Westerners looked at this social practice as a superstition.

20. Session IX, Decree 2.
21. Gouvea and Brown observed 'the observance of untouchability was a matter of expediency for them, because they had to move about among the high caste Hindus' (Ananthakrishna Ayyar, *Anthropology*, Chapter 3). According to K.J. John, Before the Synod of Diamper Kerala Syrians became almost a caste in them with their own subcastes, scrupulously avoiding pollution by the low castes and observing untouchability and unapproachability. But the Synod abolished many primitive and inhuman customs of Thomas Christians and decreed against the observance of caste system and rules associated with it. (John, K.J, *op.cit.*, pp.186-187).
22. Session VII (2nd), Decree 13.
23. Session IX, Decree 11.
24. Session VII (2nd), Decree 10.
25. Session IX, Decree 13.
26. Session IX, Decree 6 and 7.
27. Session IX, Decree 16.
28. James Aerthayil, *The Spiritual Heritage of St.Thomas Christians*, pp.207-208;
29. John, K.J., *op.cit.*, pp.185-86.
30. Joseph Puthukkattukaran, *Kerala Kristhavar* (Malayalam), pp.118-21; John Pallath, (Fr), *Menezes and Synod of Diamper* (Malayalam), pp.71-72.
31. Session IX, Decree: 4
32. James Aerthayil, *op.cit.*, pp. 209 –210.
33. Session IX, Decree 18
34. Panikkar, K.M, *Malabar and the Portuguese*, p.180.
35. Brown, L.W., *op.cit.*, p.169.
36. Rao, M.S.A., *Social Changes in Malabar*; pp.15-16.
37. Joseph Thekkedath, *Christianity*, p.88.
38. Tisserent, *Eastern Christianity*, p.166; and John, K.J, *op.cit.*, pp.188-89.

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