

Palakunnathu Abraham Malpan

Life story of Palakunnathu Abraham Malpan

Leader of the Reformation

(Abraham Malpan, Palakunnathu, Maramon)

1796-1845



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Biography

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“The Malpan was a strong Churchman, loyal to the best traditions of his Church. He wanted only to effect such reforms in the Church as were consistent with the apostolic and truly evangelical traditions of the Church. This he tried to do by translating and revising the liturgy and by doing away with the unscriptural practices which had crept into the Church and by restoring the Church to what he considered to be its prime position before the Synod of Diamper. He therefore strove hard for the abolition of auricular confession (confessing the sin to a priest), prayers for the dead, invocation of saints, and unhealthy veneration (giving deep reverence or respect) of sacraments. He reintroduced the practice of giving Holy Communion to the people in both kinds. Further he emphasized the reading and study of the Bible, family-worship and evangelistic work. He also insisted on a high moral standard of conduct for laity and clergy alike. All this created a ferment in the Church and its effects are still discernible in the Syrian Church as a whole”. (Mar Thoma Sabha Directory)

Abraham Malpan

Christianity was brought to India by St. Thomas an Apostle of Jesus Christ. St. Thomas landed in the Malabar Coast in 52 A.D and converted many high caste Hindus and established 7 Churches. We do not know much about the history of the Christian Church in the first few centuries. Many visitors had recorded in their travel records the existence of a very active church in Malabar. Records are available about the visits of many Church leaders from Asia Minor, Palestine and Persia during this period of time. Malabar Church always welcomed the foreign church leaders without enquiring much about their faith and practices. The Church in Malabar remained almost as an isolated Church.

The Malankara Church was an Independent Church even though it was having relationship with the Syrian Churches. It was not under the supremacy of any foreign Bishops or Churches. Portuguese sailor Vasco de Gamma arrived in Malabar in 1498. He was a member of the Roman Catholic Church which owed its allegiance to the Pope in Rome. The Portuguese people under the leadership of an Archbishop named Alexio de Menezies convened the meeting of all Church leaders in a place called Diamper (Udayamperoor) near Ernakulam in 1599. He succeeded in bringing the Malankara Church under the domination of the Pope. This state of affairs continued for 54 years. But people who objected this movement – they who were concerned about the independence of the Church - assembled in a Church compound in Mattancherry (Cochin) in 1653 and took an oath severing all the connections with the Roman Church. This oath ceremony is known as “Oath of the Coonen Cross”. Thus once again Church became independent, but a portion of it remained with the Roman Catholic Church.

After the Oath of the Coonen Cross, the Malankara Church continued its relationship with the Patriarch of Antioch. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, missionaries of the Church Missionary Society came to Kerala. With the help of these foreign missionaries, the Bible was translated into Malayalam. The New Testament was published in 1829 and the Old Testament in 1835 and the complete Bible in 1841. Reading of the Scriptures in their own language enlightened the common man. Missionaries even started a Theological College (Old Seminary) in Kottayam to train the priests. Abraham Malpan was a teacher in this seminary.

Abraham Malpan was born in the Palakunnathu family of Maramon in 1796. We are not sure about his birth date. Before his birth, his father died and we don't know much about his father. He lost his mother while he was only two years old. His mother was a member of the Mullasseril family of Pandanadu, near Chengannur. Malpan had only

one brother, named Mathunny. Both the boys were brought up by their father's elder brother Palakunnathu Thomas Malpan.

After the primary education Abraham was ordained as a deacon and he was sent to the house of Malpan Korah Kathanar of Padijarekutte Family in Puthuppally, near Kottayam to study the Syriac language and the worship orders. He became an expert in Syriac language under the strict discipline of the Korah Malpan.

Abraham Malpan and Kaithayil Gheeverghese Malpan were teachers in the Old Seminary Kottayam. Both of them tried to restore the Church to its original purity, by casting away the prevailing wrong teachings and evil practices which had crept in by its association with other Churches and religions in the course of time.

Afterwards Malpan married Aleyamma, daughter of Tharakan from the Thondamvelil Family of Thumpamon. Deacon Abraham was very loyal and strict to all the religious practices of that day. Almost all his parish members in Maramon were agriculturists. Malpan was an ardent believer of Muthappan, a local saint.

Reward for getting married

Col. John Munro was of the opinion that priests are to be of married persons. Due to Col. Munro's influence, Metropolitan Punnathra Mar Dionysius gave permission to all unmarried priests to marry. To encourage the priests Col. Munro had promised cash awards, of Rs.400/- to the first and Rs.150/- for others. Abraham Malpan was one among the first two who got this award from Col. Munro.

Muthappan

One foreign Bishop from Tigris, His Holiness Yeldo Mar Baselios came to Kothamangalam in 1685 (1684) and he became sick and died on the 13th day of his arrival (on 20 Kanny 860 M.E). To remember him people started a festival in his name, and called it Muthappan Festival. People from Maramon, Mavelikkara and Puthen Cavu used to visit Kothamangalam to participate in this festival, and pay homage to this saint. People believed that Muthappan was the cause of all their prosperity in agriculture. So soil was brought from Kothamanglam to Maramon and a replica wooden tomb was made and people started worshipping this saint. Muthappan festival was good source of income for the Maramon Parish. A wooden doll in human shape (Almost three feet in height) was made to represent the Muthappan and kept in Maramon Church. Every year during the Muthappan Festival (usually in September) this wooden image of the saint used to be taken around in procession and people used to offer prayers and offerings to it.

Abraham Malpan in Jail

Abraham Malpan was ordained as a priest in 1815 by Mar Thoma VIII. There were some doubts about the validity of the consecration of Mar Thoma VIII. Malpan too had some doubts about his own ordination. So when a Jacobite Metran from Syria came, he himself got re-ordained by him. Mar Dionysius lodged a complaint against Malpan and the Government sent Abraham Malpan to prison for flouting (showing contempt or mocking) the authority of the Indian Metran.

State of Malankara (Kerala) Church in the beginning of the 19th Century

1. Church services were conducted in the Syriac Language, which was not known to most of the Participants.
2. The priests were not having any theological training. Even young boys aged 7 or 8 were ordained as deacons at the request of their parents.
3. Prayers to the Saints and masses for the dead relatives were conducted in the Church.
4. There was no permanent income or salary for the priests. Hence fees were levied for rites and sacraments like baptism, marriage and Masses for the dead etc.
5. Bible was a closed book for most of the congregation. There was no Malayalam Bible (The Four Gospels were translated into Malayalam in 1811. Rev. Benjamin Bailey published the first Malayalam Bible in 1841). The divine truths were a hidden treasure for the common man.
6. Religious life was centered on certain ceremonies. Festivals and rituals. Offerings and prayers were made to certain Local Saints to get prosperity in agriculture.

Deacon at the age of 7 and Vicar at 16!!!!

According to Church practices and Biblical Instructions, Theological students were made deacons at the age of 20 and priests at the age of 30. But during the time just before the reformation small children of 7 years were ordained as deacons by the Bishops after taking big bribes from the parents. And people who did not have any theological education were made priests at the age of 16 or 17.

Visit of Claudius Buchanan – Chaplain of the East India Company

Claudius Buchanan, a chaplain of the East India Company, visited Travancore and Cochin in 1806-7. He was very much interested in the ancient Church of Malabar and published a book in England entitled “Christian Researches in Asia”. By reading this book the CMS missionaries got interested in the Malabar Church. He took the initiative to translate the four gospels into Malayalam. These were printed in Bombay in 1811.

Help from the Church Missionary Society (CMS)

Church Missionary Society (CMS) is an organisation established on 12 April 1799 in London for the propagation of the Word of God around the world. Colonel Munro (Resident of Travancore from 1810 to 1819) requested the help of the CMS to improve the conditions of the Kerala Christians. The first CMS Missionary, Rev. Thomas Norton came to Alleppey in 1816. Then Alleppey was a famous sea port, known as the Venice of the East. Three more missionaries – Rev. Benjamin Bailey, Rev. Joseph Fenn and Rev. Henry Baker came after Rev. Norton.

Main Events which took place as a result of the connection with the Church Missionary Society (CMS)

1. In 1813 a seminary was established in Kottayam for giving training to the clergy (Old Seminary).
2. An endowment fund For Rs.10, 300/- was established for clergy training.
3. A printing press was established in Kottayam for printing the Bible.
4. Complete Malayalam Bible was published in 1841.
5. Primary Schools and Schools for Higher Education were established in and around Kottayam.

The first missionaries had a very cordial relationship with the Metropolitans Pulikot Mar Dionysius (1817-18) and Punnathara Mar Dionysius (1818-1825) of that time. But after the arrival of two young missionaries Rev. Joseph Peet and Rev. W. J. Woodcock tension developed between the Metropolitan and the missionaries. For the continuation of relationship between the Syrian Church and the Missionaries the following suggestions were made for the consideration of the Metropolitan.

1. As a rule, only those who have received certificates from the seminary in Kottayam should be ordained.
2. Accounts of Church lands and properties should be rendered to the British Resident.
3. There should be a permanent endowment so that the clergy is paid a fixed salary instead of depending on uncertain payments at the time of services in the Church.
4. Every Parish Church must have its school.
5. During divine services every Sunday the Gospel must be expounded to the people.
6. Malayalam prayers are to be used instead of Syriac prayers.

The Metropolitan Cheppat Mar Dionysius was not willing to implement the above recommendations proposed by the Missionaries. Many people including the Anglican Bishop Wilson from Calcutta tried for reconciliation. On January 18, 1836 a meeting

of all Church representatives was convened at Mavelikkara to discuss about the recommendations. In the meeting, the recommendations were rejected by the Syrian Church and both parties decided to separate. The Metropolitan sent a circular letter to all the parishes prohibiting any association with the missionaries. Church properties were partitioned on 4th April 1840 by arbitration.

Blessed and God Fearing Rulers of Travancore

Travancore was one of the few Kingdoms in British India, ruled by God fearing and very broad minded rulers. During the time of H.H Rani Gouri Laxmi Bhai (1810-1815) slavery was abolished from Travancore by royal declaration (1812). H.H. Gouri Parvathi Bhai (1815-1829) granted tax free lands and properties for the construction of Churches. Even the wood for construction of the churches was given free of cost by the Government. All sorts of help and assistance were provided to the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the Church Mission Society (CMS) to start their work in Nagercoil (till 1956 Nagercoil was part of Travancore), Alleppey and Kottayam. To improve the education system among the Christians an island was donated (Manro Island near Quilon).

Church Missionary Society (CMS) continued their work among the non-Christians along with some members of the Syrian Church who supported their reforms. Churches were established in Mallappally and Mavelikara and the Anglican Diocese of Travancore and Cochin was formed in 1878.

Abraham Malpan who was a Professor in the Seminary wanted to make the changes in the Syrian Church without joining the Anglican Church. Anglican Missionaries even offered a huge salary to Abraham Malpan to join them. He was courageous enough not to join, but to say that “My kitchen is far better than the Golden house of someone else”.

Abraham Malpan and his close friend Kaithayil Geeverghese Malpan were the two main leaders who wanted to make real changes in the Malankara Church. But the Metropolitan (Cheppat Mar Dionysius) was not willing for any reform in the Church. He adhered strictly to all the old beliefs and the supremacy of the Foreign Church leaders over the Malankara Church.

In 1836, Abraham Malpan and 11 other priests submitted a memorandum to the British Resident Col. Fraser, requesting him to do the necessary changes in the Malankara Church. But the Resident couldn't do any changes.

As there was no other alternative, Malpan decided to give leadership to the reformation in the Church without leaving the Malankara Church.

Destruction of Muthappan in Maramon.

As a result of the light received from the study of the Holy Scriptures, Malpan realized that Muthappan worship is a pagan idea and he threw the wooden doll of Muthappan in a well inside the Maramon Church Compound on 19 Kanny 1012 M.E on the previous day of the Muthappan Festival. This incident offended some people but the practice was stopped.

Reforms made by Abraham Malpan

1. Worship services including Holy Communion were conducted in Malayalam.
2. Prayers to the Saints and prayers for the dead were removed from the worship books.
3. Changes were made in the various prayers in the prayer books incorporating the divine light received through the study of the Bible.

By hearing the activities of the Malpan, Metropolitan Joseph Mar Dionysius excommunicated Malpan from the Church and the Metropolitan refused to ordain the students taught by Malpan. It was a real blow to the movement started by the Malpan. But Malpan continued his reformation work.

Importance was given to the Word of God - Bible. People started to read the Bible in their own language. Prayer groups were established to study the Word. The Bible became the sole source of faith and practices. Any beliefs or practices which were detrimental to the Word of God were discontinued. Till that time the Bible was a closed book for an ordinary layman. The priests were the custodians of the Bible. And they thought that only priests were allowed to interpret the divine truths. The need for salvation, which is the free gift of God, became a reality to ordinary people. The Holy Spirit began to work and many changed the patterns of their life style by denouncing the evil ways.

Sunday School Classes for the Children were started in many parishes. The practice of ordaining young boys without any training as priests were stopped. Theological education became a must for priesthood.

But there was no Bishop to give leadership for the reformation movement. Abraham Malpan sent his brother's son Deacon Mathew to the Patriarch of Antioch in Syria. The Patriarch was impressed by the dedication, hard work, deep Biblical knowledge

and intelligence of Deacon Mathew. He ordained him as priest and consecrated him as Metropolitan, with the name Mathews Mar Athanasius in 1842. After serving the Churches in Syria he came back to Kerala in 1843. Even though, first he celebrated the Holy Communion with the old liturgy, later he gave active leadership to the reformation.

Holy Communion in Malayalam – 1836 (1012 M.E. Chingham 15)

In his mother parish Maramon, Abraham Malpan conducted the Holy Communion Service in Malayalam Language (mother tongue of the worshippers). Till that time communion services were held in Syriac language which was unknown to almost all the participants. Malpan had to translate the worship books for this event. People readily welcomed his worship services in Malayalam.

Malpan excommunicates his cousin for non-observance of Sabbath

One of Malpan's elder cousins went to Church service on a Sunday morning after plucking some vegetables to make Curry and Thoran. Someone informed Malpan about this. During the Church Service, Malpan openly excommunicated his cousin for this incident saying that he had violated the fourth commandment.

Sunday Starts on Saturday Evening!!!

According to Syrian Christian Tradition, Sunday - Sabbath day - starts from Saturday evening, and ends on Sunday Evening. So on Saturday evening, children were not allowed to study nor do anything connected with their secular education. Saturday evening was the time set apart to study the Word of God - The Bible. It was also the preparation time for the next day's Sunday School Classes, Worships, Fellowship meetings and other religious functions.

Malpan throws away the Curry made on Sunday

Malpan did not like people to do any job on Sunday. He was a very strict observer of Sabbath- Sunday. One day while he was having lunch at home after the Church service, he came to know that the coconut used to make curry for the lunch was plucked on the same day (Sunday) morning from a coconut tree in his court yard. He couldn't tolerate that. He threw away that curry without even tasting it.

Palayamkodan Banana Tree – Malpan brought from Palayamkottai in Tamil Nadu

Once Malpan went to Palayamkottai, a small town near Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu, to visit some missionaries. There he was impressed by a special type of banana plant,

and he brought few seeds to Maramon, which later spread in and around Maramon. This tasty banana plant is called Palayamkodan Vazha - (brought from Palayamkottai). Malpan took initiative in the cultivation of tapioca and sweet potato which he brought from Kottayam. All these later became a good source of income for the agricultural families in and around Maramon.

Children of Malpan.

Malpan's first son died while he was very young; afterwards he had 4 sons and 4 daughters.

Daughters:-

1. Mariamma - Married to Kaniyantara family of Mepral, Husband died, so remarried to Kutticattu family of Ayamanam.
2. Annamma - Married to Deacon Abraham of Ayroorkuzhyil
3. Aleyamma - Married to Tharakan of Chakkalamannil, Thumpamon
4. Saramma - Married to Varkey of Edavammemelil, Eraviperoor.

Sons:-

1. Mathaikunju – Married from Velliyampellil of Mallappally
2. Most. Rev. Thomas Mar Athanasious Metropolitan
3. Kochu Koshy Kunju – Married from Puthenveetil , Puthen Cavu
4. Most Rev Titus I Mar Thoma Metropolitan

Wycliffe of the East/ Luther of the Syrian Church

John Wycliffe (1328-1384) was one of the leaders of the Western Reformation. Malpan's biographer Rev. M. C. George Kassisa calls him as Wycliff of the East. The Most Rev. Juhanon Mar Thoma Metropolitan in his book "Christianity in India and a Brief History of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church" calls Malpan as the Luther of the Syrian Church. (Martin Luther (1483-1546) was another leader of the Western Reformation.)

"The Malapan was a strong Churchman, loyal to the best traditions of his Church. He wanted only to effect such reforms in the Church as were consistent with the Apostolic and truly Evangelical traditions of the Church. This he tried to do by translating and revising the liturgy and by doing away with the unscriptural practices which had crept into the Church and by restoring the Church to what he considered to be its prime position before the Synod of Diamper. He therefore strove hard for the abolition of auricular confession (confessing the sin to a priest), prayers for the dead, invocation of saints, and unhealthy veneration (giving deep reverence or respect) of

sacraments. He reintroduced the practice of giving Holy Communion to the people in both kinds. Further he emphasized the reading and study of the Bible, family worship and evangelistic work. He also insisted on a high moral standard of conduct for laity and clergy alike. All this created a ferment in the Church and its effects are still discernible in the Syrian Church as a whole.” (Mar Thoma Sabha Directory)

Man of Prayer

He was a man of prayer. Marks of his tears were there in his prayer books. He was much concerned about the future of our Church. He firmly believed that the reformation was the divine need of the time.

Abraham Malpan was a diabetic patient. Those days there were no proper treatment for diabetes. At the age of 50 he became very sick. Many of his friends including the CMS missionary Rev. Joseph Peet visited him. Rev. Joseph Peet was a very good friend and supporter of Malpan. Malpan was fully conscious till the last breath. He was called to his eternal home at 3.00 pm on Sunday, 7 September 1845 (24 Chingham 1021 M.E) at the age of 50. He was buried on the next day in the Maramon Mar Thoma Church.



Important events during the life of Abraham Malpan

1796 - 971 M.E. - Born in Palakunnathu Family, Maramon. Malpan's father died before his birth

1798 - 973 M.E. - Mother passes away

1799 April 12 – The formation of the Church Missionary Society for Africa and the East in London.

1800 - 1810 - Colonel Macaulay becomes Resident of Travancore.

1810 - 1819 - Colonel John Munro becomes Resident of Travancore. For some time he was the "Divan" as well. He was a true friend of the Syrian Church.

1811 - Publication of the book "Christian Researches in Asia" by Claudius Buchanan

1811 - Abraham Malpan became deacon - Ordained by Mar Thoma VIII

1811 - Publication of Four Gospels in Malayalam.

1812 - Royal declaration abolishing slavery in Travancore

1813 - 15 - Beginning of Theological College (Seminary) In Kottayam

1814 - T. F. Middleton becomes the first Anglican Bishop of India, in Calcutta

1815 - Abraham Malpan ordained as a Priest

1815 - Becomes Malpan (Teacher) in the Kottayam Theological Seminary (Old Seminary)

1816 - May 8, Thomas Norton- first CMS missionary arrives at Cochin with his wife and two year old son.

1816 - November- Second CMS Missionary Benjamin Bailey arrives in Alleppey.

1817 - March 7- Hindus burn the Christian Church in Tiruvalla.

1821 - October 18 – First printing press arrives in Kottayam. It was a gift from CMS.

1829 - New Testament printed in Malayalam- Translation by Benjamin Bailey.

1830 - Missionary Alexander Duff arrives in Calcutta. He gave leadership for propagating the English Education in India.

1833 - CMS Missionary Joseph Peet arrives in Kottayam.

1836 - Mavelikkara Padiyola (Agreement) – CMS breaks relationship with the Syrian Church.

1837 - Abraham Malpan conducts Holy Communion Service in Malayalam with the new liturgy. (Chingham 15, 1013 M.E)

1838 - Beginning of CMS College, Kottayam

1841 - 1842 - Publication of the Complete Bible in Malayalam- Bailey's translation.

1842 - Consecration of Mathews Mar Athanasius in Mardin, Syria.

1843 - Mathews Mar Athanasius arrives in Cochin from Mardin in Syria.

1845 - Abraham Malpan passes away



Notes

Malabar, Malankara – In the olden days, the western part of South India was known as Malabar. In those days the word Malabar was used to refer the present (Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar) Kerala State.

John Wycliffe (1328-1384) - was a leading English Philosopher in religion and politics during the Middle Ages. Many consider him as a forerunner of the Reformation in the Church.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) - Luther was the leader of the Reformation movement that led to the birth of Protestant Churches.

Diamper - Udayamperoor- is a small town near Ernakulam where the Synod was held in 1599. The old Church is still preserved as a historical monument.

Coonen Cross - Coonen in Malayalam means- bent. It is a stone cross – which still stands in the Mattancherry Church Compound with a little slant to one side. When the oath was taken people tied ropes to the cross and due to the pull of the crowd it was slanted to one side slightly.

Malpan - Malpan means Teacher- Professor- Teacher of Syriac Language – Religious teacher etc.

Resident- A representative of the East India Company or the British Empire in the Native Kingdoms in India.

Maramon Mar Thoma Parish - It is believed that the Maramon Mar Thoma Parish was established on 28 August 1440 (Chinghom 12, 616 M.E). Most of the present Mar Thoma parishes in and around Maramon were under this Parish. Maramon was Malpan's mother Parish.



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The End

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All For His Glory

