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Synod of Diamper: significance and contributions in the history of Christianity in India

History teaches a valuable lesson that any event in the past, which leaves dampening effects on an entire group or community of people, will have an overbearing effect for years and centuries. In that sense, the synod of Diamper which tried to subjugate the spirit and belief system of an entire section of people has its effects still lingering. Adding to the facts is that the synod did not just leave its imprints in the religious side alone, but also had its share of social, cultural, and political casualties. The synod of Diamper is probably the most famous episode in Indian church History, not as a model of an ecclesiastical assembly, but for the extraordinary nature of its decisions and their effects.

Keywords: Synod of Diamper, India, Malankara Church, Christian East.

The Context of the Synod of Diamper

The context in which the Synod of Diamper was called for is very important as it did not have relevance only to religious issues but it was an impact of so many other socio-politico-cultural implications. The doctrines and decrees enforced at the synod imply that Latinization of the Saint Thomas Christians was the main motto of the synod. In order to identify the issues behind the synod of Diamper we have to look in to the relationship between the Portuguese and St. Thomas Christians in Kerala. When the Portuguese came to India, St. Thomas Christians who were living in the midst of Hinduism received them gladly as their fellow Christians. St. Thomas Christians presented a memorandum to Vasco da Gama, requesting him to take these faith community under his king's protection¹. In the beginning the relations between the Portuguese missionaries and the St. Thomas Christians were cordial. The western church believes that the Roman Catholic Church was the only true form of the church. So they wanted other groups to follow their practices and doctrines. They felt that the Syrian practices are worthless and need correction. Here comes the conflict and context which give birth to the situation of the Synod of Diamper. The main unexpressed objective was to suppress the jurisdiction of the Chaldean Patriarch and fetch the Thomas Christian community under the control of Portuguese Padruado and the patronage of the king of Portugal². The Portuguese had more than the religious factor in their minds, it was the sure way to colonize and boost their trading. They actually subjugated the Syrian Christians and this, they achieved in the guise of religion but it was clearly a cultural invasion also. The Archbishop of Goa, Menezes who was the convener of this synod wanted to Romanize everything and make every one of the rituals and customs followed by the Syrian Christians influenced by Portuguese customs. In 1597, Mar Abraham the bishop of St. Thomas Christians died leaving the administration in the hands of Archdeacon George. The Portuguese find it as the right opportunity to hold power over the community when they are in the time of not having a Bishop. This was the time Alexis De Menezes the Arch bishop of Goa played a great role in calling the synod.³

Synod of Diamper: A Historical Sketch

As we discussed earlier, the synod of Diamper was convened in the church of Diamper on 20 June 1599, under the leadership of Aleixo de Menezes, Archbishop of Goa. After the death of Mar Abraham, the then Archbishop of Angamale, in the year 1597, the Archdeacon, George held the responsibility as an Administrator. ⁴But Menezes, the Archbishop of Goa did not favour him. But he had to confirm George as the Administrator since the Archdeacon was well received by the people. Menezes undertook a visit to many churches of Saint Thomas Christians and slowly earned their favour and planned to oust George and appoint a new administrator. The Archdeacon George gave into the demands of Menezes since he did not want breaches amidst the sectors. A void was created in the leadership

1 C.B. Firth, *An Introduction to the Indian Church History*, (Madras: CLS, 1968) p. 88.

2 C.B. Firth, *An Introduction to the Indian Church History*, (Madras: CLS, 1968) p. 88.

3 K.V. Koshy, *St. Thomas and the Syrian churches of India*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1999) p. 45.

4 C.B. Firth, *An Introduction to the Indian Church History*, (Madras: CLS, 1968) p. 88.

of the churches in India. It brought the much wanted results for Portuguese to foist their own customs, law, liturgy and rituals among the Saint Thomas Christians. At this juncture, Aleixo Menezes convened the synod which saw a gathering of about 130 ecclesiastics and 660 laymen.

Important Decisions of the Synod

K.K.Kuruville explains that the plan and purpose of the synod was convened for the increase and exaltation of the catholic faith among the Syrians in Malabar.⁵ Thus, we can identify the flow of these intentions throughout the decisions of the synod as well. The story of the synod of Diamper colored as a victory of the catholic church in India, was spread throughout Europe by the publishing of Govuea's 'Jornoda do Arce bishop de Goa' together with the acts of the synod of Diamper.⁶ But the report was one sided and there was no contemporary historian of St.thomas Christians to write the facts of the synod.⁷ In the synod Around 200 decrees were pronounced. They were first formulated in Portuguese by Menezes, who presided the synod and then they were translated into Malayalam. It affected the liturgy and also the administration. The synod took a bold decision of banning many heretic books calling the contents of those books as spreading concepts against the catholic creeds. Some of the major heretic books prohibited were:

- 1 The infancy of our Savior which conceptualized Joseph having another wife and children when he was betrothed to Mary; Child Jesus was reproved for his naughty tricks; He went to school and learned from them; St. Joseph, suspecting Mary of adultery took her to priests, who gave her the water of jealousy to drink; that Mary brought forth with pain, and parting from her company, not being able to go farther, she retired to a stable at Bethlehem.
- 2 Book of John Barialdan which spread the ideas that in Christ, there were two persons: a divine and human; the names Christ and Emanuel are that of only human person, so the name Jesus should not be adored; the union of incarnation is common to all the three divine persons, who were all incarnated; the union of the incarnation is only an accidental union of love.
- 3 The Procession of Holy Spirit opined that Holy Spirit proceeded only from the Father and not from the Son.
- 4 The Book of Fathers contained the concepts that Mary was not to be called the mother of God and there were two persons in Christ.
- 5 The Book of Synods which argued that the Roman Church had fallen from the faith defying the canons of the Apostles and matrimony is not a sacrament and might be dissolved for the bad conditions of the parties.
- 6 The Book of Timothy the Patriarch contained a concept that the true body of our Lord Christ is not there in the sacrament of altar, but only its figure.
- 7 An Exposition of the Gospels conceptualized that there are two persons in Christ and Christ is a pure creature; Christ was the adopted Son of God, and not God's natural Son; Christ received new grace in baptism, which he had

⁵ K.K.Kuruville, A History of the Marthoma Church and its doctrines, (Madras: CLS, 1951) pp. 4-11.

⁶ Jonas Thaliath, The Synod of Diamper, (Rome: Pontifical Institute Orientalium Studiorum, 1958) p. 2.

⁷ G.M. Rae, The Syrian Church in India (London: William blackwood & sons, 1902) p. 272.

not before; Christ is only the image of the Word, and the pure temple of the Holy Spirit; Eucharist is only the image of the body of Christ, which is only in heaven at the right hand of the Father, and not here on earth; Christ, as pure man, did not know when the Day of Judgment was to be; When St. Thomas put his hand into Christ's side, and said, "My Lord and my God!" he was not speaking to Christ as God, but it was only an exclamation made to God on such a miracle; The authority that Christ gave to St. Peter over the church, was the same that he gave to other priests, so his successors have no more power or jurisdiction than other bishops; Mary is not the mother of God; First Epistle of St. John, and that of St. James, are not the writings of those Apostles, but of some other persons of the same name, and therefore are not canonical.

Apart from these some other books prohibited were the Book of Homilies, Book of Lots, Book of Hormis da Raban, Ring of Solomon, and Menra.⁸

The synod was paramount in the way that the decisions taken had far reaching effects in the religious, socio, cultural and political milieu. The main decisions taken were:⁹

- Synod of Diamper strongly questioned and attacked certain Hindu beliefs, related to migration, fate and astrology.
- Some rituals, ceremonies, and customs followed in birth, matrimony, death, and idea of purification in touching the lower caste people commonly ascribed to Hinduism, were practiced also by some Christians of St. Thomas. They were strictly proscribed and abandoned completely.
- The Christians were vetoed from attending Hindu festivals like Onam.
- The Christian teachers were banned from placing or using Hindu idols in their schools.
- Polygamy and Concubinage were also forbidden.
- Clergymen were interdicted from marital relations, military services to Hindu rulers and other religion-involving activities.
- Hindu musicians, who were used to hold events in churches were no more allowed to do it as the synod banned it out rightly.

Most of the decisions taken at synod were the ill-consequences of the ignorance concerning the indigenous customs and traditions of St. Thomas Christians. The synod claimed of an envisaging of a radical change in the life pattern among the Syrian Christians. There are many historians approach this decisions in a legal point of view and they states that Menezes interference as metropolitan should be considered illegitimate not only because Angamali was an oriental church and as such with its different tradition did not come under the provision of the council of trent.¹⁰ Similarly A.M mundadan says Menezes really was not the bishop of the church of the St. thomas christians to make all changes regarding the practice and doctrines.¹¹ Menezes also ordained priests in large numbers about 90 in all in

⁸ Jonas Thaliath, *The Synod of Diamper* (Rome: Pontifical Institute umorientalium Studiorum, 1958) p. 21.

⁹ K.V. Koshy. *St. thomas and the Syrian churches of India*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1999), pp. 45–46.

¹⁰ Jonas Thaliath, *The Synod of Diamper*, (Rome: Pontifical Institute umorientalium Studiorum, 1958). P. 65.

¹¹ A.M. Mundadan, "The invalidity of the Synod of Diamper", in *Indian Church History Review*, Vol. 1, Number 1 (June, 1967), p. 20.

order to ensure majority of the votes of the clergy at the synod which was shortly to be convened.¹² Julius Richter says that Menezes brought his very compendious decree already with him, and used his craft and authority to such purpose that it was accepted, signed, and sworn to, practically without alteration.¹³

Significance of Synod of Diamper in the History of Christianity of India

The synod's immediate effect was to altogether change the way of liturgy and also the administration that was in vogue with the tradition of Syrian practices. Although the Syrian Christians of Malabar were separated from the Chaldean Patriarch, in the long run they returned to unite with the Pope. The Jesuits were ousted from the scene after a direct intervening of the Pope himself. The arrival of Mar Gregorios in 1665 marked the beginning of the associations of St. Thomas Christians with the Church of West Syria. Those who accepted the West Syrian theological and liturgical tradition of Mar Gregorios became known as Jacobite's. Those who continued with East Syrian theological and liturgical tradition are known as the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church in communion with the Catholic Church. They got their own Syro-Malabar Hierarchy on 21 December 1923 with the Metropolitan Mar Augustine Kandathil as the Head of their Church. Saint Thomas Christians by this process got divided into East Syrians and West Syrians.

The validity of the synod has been the subject matter of various debates since then. While there is one section of people arguing that the synod is indeed very much valid, there is another section of people refusing its validity categorically. As Juhanon Marthoma rightly pointed out the ethics of the synod is that armed with the backing of the Portuguese victory and with character which stooped to use any means to achieve the desired end by friendly visits, bribery and threats, Menezes managed to win over many leaders at his side.¹⁴ L.W Brown also pointed how the resistance of the St.thomas Christians were objected, he states that Menezes did not hear the objections of the St.thomas Christians. Many objections were raised, but in every case the Arch Bishop partisans rose to speak in support and the opponents of the measures, the leaders lacked ability and courage to sustain their objection.¹⁵ According to the estimations of the above historians Menezes used a very unethical Method to win over the Thomas Christian.

Post Diamper Experiences Of the Churches

As discussed earlier there was a void in the leadership of St.thomas Christian Churches, after George the Archdeacon had stepped down. The suppression of the Portuguese was felt by the St.thomas Christian people who slowly resorted to violent actions to show their protests. The first sincere protest took place in

¹² C.P. Mathew & M.M. Thomas, *The Indian Church of St.Thomas* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1967), p. 30.

¹³ Julius Richter, *History of Mission in India*, Trans.by Sysney H.Moore, (Edinburgh: Oliphant Anderson & Feran, 1908), p. 82.

¹⁴ Jouhanon Marthoma, *Christianity in India and a Brief history of the Marthoma Syrian Church* (Madras: K.M Cherian, 1954), pp. 15–20.

¹⁵ L.W. Brown, *The Indian Christians of St.thomas* (London: Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, 1956), pp. 34–39.

1653 under the leadership of Malankara MooppenThoma. They assembled at Matthancherry church and took an oath that is famously called as the Great Oath of Bent Cross and in Malayalam it is called as CoonenKurusuSathyam. In the words of Stephen Neill, an Anglican Protestant missionary and later Anglican Bishop of Tamil Nadu from Scotland in his book, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707*:¹⁶

On January 1653 priests and people assembled in the church of Our Lady at Mattanceri, and standing in front of a cross and lighted candles swore upon the holy Gospel that they would no longer obey Garcia, and that they would have nothing further to do with the Jesuits they would recognize the archdeacon as the governor of their church. This is the famous oath of the Koonen Cross (the open-air Cross which stands outside the church at Mattenchery). The Thomas Christians did not at any point suggest that they wished to separate themselves from the pope. They could no longer tolerate the arrogance of Garcia. And their detestation of the Jesuits, to whose overbearing attitude and lack of sympathy they attributed all their troubles, breathes through all the documents of the time. But let the pope send them a true bishop not a Jesuit, and they will be pleased to receive and obey him.

Conclusion

The synod of Diamper and its significance in the history of Christian churches in India is not only a historical point of reference rather it is an experience which leads the churches in Kerala towards their own heritage and tradition. Therefore, synod of Diamper should consider as a historical point which gives strength and courage for resistance and finding their own roots and possibilities in an independent way of exercising the faith and practices. Synod of Diamper is also consider as a model of resistance and reinvention of people's dignity and freedom from the power and the oppressed in terms of faith and traditions. The Syrian Christians of Kerala in the leadership of the churches proclaimed this freedom and declare their courage to stand firm and showcase their solidarity. Thus Synod of Diamper transcend its historical boundaries and enriched the church and society in a larger way to develop a paradigm of resistance and solidarity in the midst of struggle and injustice.

¹⁶ A.M. Mundadan. *Indian Christians search for identity & Struggle for Autonomy* (Bangalore: Dharmara Publications, 1984), pp. 45–46.

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Собор в Диампере: значение и вклад в историю христианства в Индии

История преподает ценный урок, что любое событие в прошлом, которое осуществляет влияние на сообщество людей, будет иметь властный эффект в течение многих лет и столетий. В этом смысле собор в Диампере, который пытался покорить дух и систему верований целой части людей, имеет свои эффекты, все еще сохраняющиеся. К фактам следует добавить, что собор не только оставил свои отпечатки на религиозной стороне, но также имел свою долю социальных, культурных и политических жертв. Собор в Диампере, пожалуй, самый известный эпизод в истории индийской церкви не как образец церковного собрания, а из-за необычайного характера его решений и их последствий.

Ключевые слова: собор в Диампере, Индия, Маланкарская церковь, христианский Восток.