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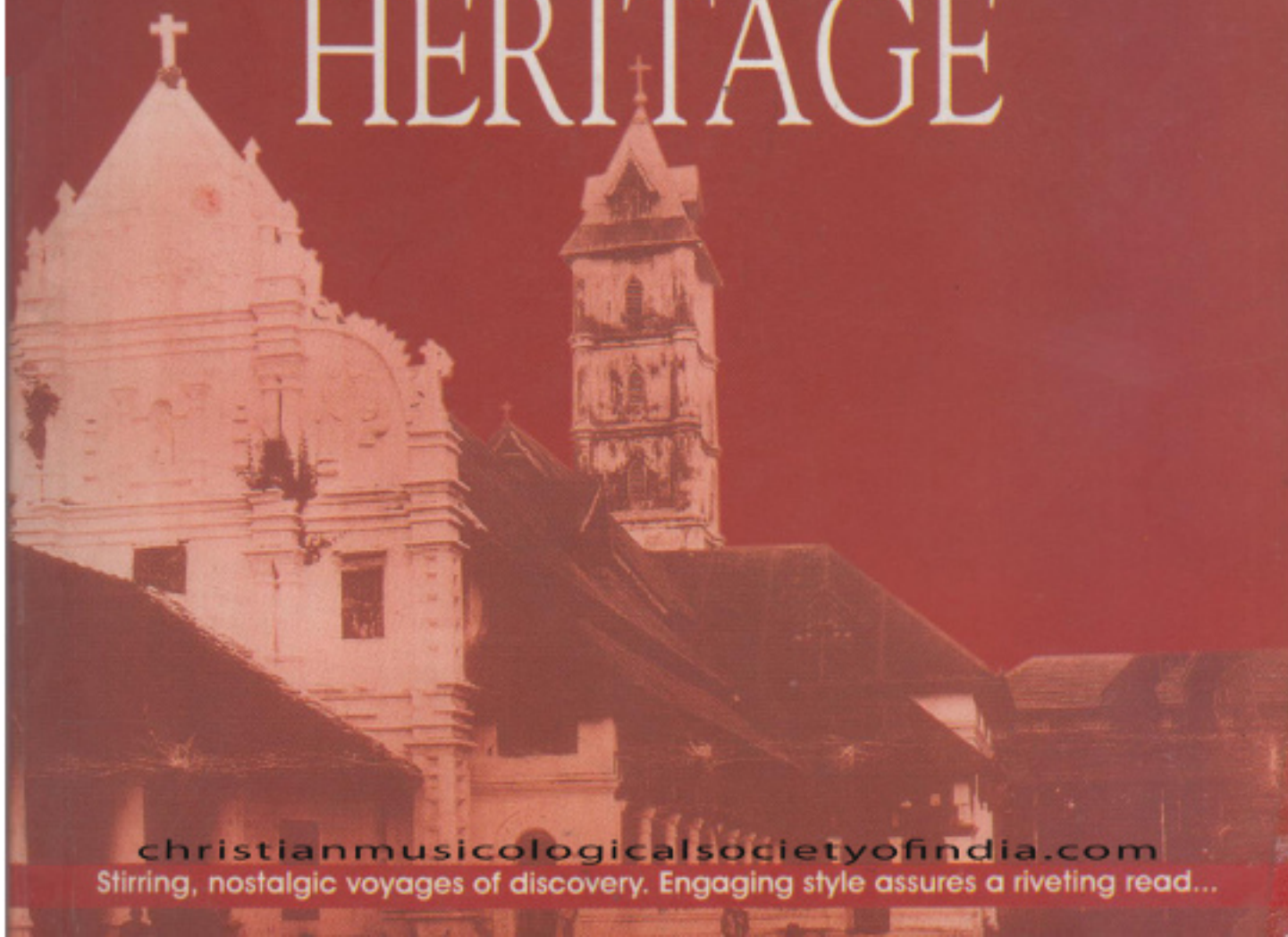
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Glimpses of
Nazraney
Heritage

Prof. George Menachery



From the publisher's desk

Ever since Prof. Menachery started to cogitate in earnest on his own cultural roots, especially after the National Seminar *Church in India Today* (1969) he happened upon many aspects of Thomas Christian history and culture which were either novel or not taken sufficiently seriously by earlier scholars. Parallel to his work on the *Thomas Encyclopaedia* (1970 onwards) and the *Church History Classics* he has been trying to expose these findings at innumerable seminars and workshops; through exhibitions and museums; in souvenirs and commemoration volumes. Most of his seminar papers have gone through many lives - he is an expert cut and paste artist - the same papers appearing with meagre changes and a few additional paragraphs or notes, before different scholarly groups, thus providing the thoughts maximum exposure from one end of the country to the other. He was extremely reluctant to give his papers for publication in a book form, as he could not decide which version to print. This led us to wade through many journals and approach seminar organizers and fellow-participants for copies or tapes of his papers. By a generous use of Prof. Menachery's favorite technique of "redaction" we have put together this little volume. The great amount of fresh thinking and discussion generated in the last three or four decades by his media contributions and the small books *Pallikkalalum Mattum* and *Kodungallur City of St. Thomas* emboldens us to bring out this little collection.

The valuable, informative, and instructive "Introduction" by Professor M.G.S.Narayanan is gratefully acknowledged.



The author Prof. George Menachery was born at Kattur on April 2, 1938. Mother: Puthenpura Kunjuvareed Kunjethy. Father: Erinjery Thoma Kochouseph. Wife: Vazhapilly Kochuvareed Maggie. After teaching university classes for thirty years he gave up the job as Head of the Department of Post-Graduate Teaching in order to concentrate on research and publication. At present he spends some time every year as Professor of Christian Art at the Pontifical Institute, Alwaye, and teaching at other theology colleges in India.

Connected with many institutions and organizations interested in the study of history and culture, he was executive member of the Kerala History Association (1975-90), Kerala Government Advisory Board of Archaeology (1975-82), University Senate, University Statutory Finance Committee, Kerala Sahitya Academy, expert committee of the Government of India Census Directorate (Kerala)...

He was also the national vice-president of the Newman Association of India-Pax Romana (1964-72), founder director of the Institute for Lay Leadership Training (1967-2004), founder director and curator of the Diocesan Christian Cultural Museum (from 1980), member of the (Arch) diocesan Pastoral Council (1978 - the present), president of Kalasadan (1984-1992), founder president of the Kerala Historical Research Society,...He has to his credit a large number of publications, research papers, articles, radio talks and TV programmes. His research activities and lectures have taken him abroad often, to more than 22 countries in 4 continents. At present he is engrossed in the work of completing the Christian Encyclopaedia, and the Church History Classics, and in setting up a comprehensive Indian Christian Museum. While not travelling in connection with one of these projects he is to be found at the ancestral family seat in Ollur, browsing in his huge library of rare books and collection of artefacts or pottering around the orchard. Detective stories and Parippu Vada are (still) major weaknesses.



Glimpses of Nazraney Heritage

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Introduction

Professor M.G.S.Narayanan

Here on my table is a collection of essays on the Christian heritage of Kerala, written by my scholarly friend, Professor George Menachery, who spent many years in the study of the church - its history, legends, arts, architecture and literature. Since he is primarily interested in social and cultural history, the theological, economic and political aspects of the Christian heritage do not figure prominently in these writings.

He is well known to the academic world as the Chief Editor of St. Thomas Encyclopedia and other books that presented for the first time a comprehensive picture of the Syrian Christian community that forms an influential sector of society in Kerala. The volumes of the encyclopedia gathered information from different, often obscure, sources and brought together the knowledge and expertise of numerous writers in a presentable form. It is an achievement of global significance as it offers an authoritative reference book for all who are interested in Christians and Christianity of India. The rich experience in the preparation of those volumes enabled this English professor to make excursions into archaeology, numismatics and art history related to Christian life. That this book is one of those byproducts must be evident from the amplitude of references that enhance the value of the essays in a big way. It may also be observed that he is up to date in this field as he mentions the latest findings of the current year on the location of the ancient harbour town of Muciri or Muziris made by the young archaeologists of the Centre for Heritage Studies in Tripunithura. (p.71) He has carefully gone through and digested much of the relevant literature on the subjects of his choice.



However, I have to confess that as a historian I find his obsession with the St. Thomas legend in its present form unacceptable. This legend crops up suddenly in Kerala in the 16th century, but there is absolutely no mention of it in the early literature of Kerala or the rest of the Christian world. The Syrian and other European versions of the life story of Apostle Thomas have no reference to his direct connection with this part of India, though they mention his eastward journey and encounter with king Gondoporus whose coins have been found in the North Western parts of India. Moreover, the contents of the legend also betray the late origin, as there was no Ceraman Perumal at Kodungallur until the 9th century, and the Brahmins who are supposed to have been converted by the saint did not occupy a prominent place in the Kerala social set up until that time.

In the first essay with the catchy title 'Christianity is Older than Hinduism in Kerala', the Professor seems to identify Vedic Brahmanism as Hinduism. This is a mistake popularized by the Western scholars of the colonial era. He is not perhaps aware of the fact that Kerala was an integral part of Tamilakam in the Sangam Age that certainly goes back to the Mauryan period before the Christian era, as Asoka has referred to the Tamil rulers including Kerala Putra. The earliest poems of the Sangam are permeated with the Dravidian or Tamil cults that form part of the Hindu culture. What the author probably intended was that Christianity had established a foothold in the harbour towns of Kerala before the temple-oriented Brahmanical creed had gained ascendancy in society. This assumption cannot be justified because we have the earliest evidence of Christian presence only in the 8th century with the Persian crosses. It is true that Christian traders could have been familiar with the Kerala coast even earlier, but this is true also in the case of the native cults that were popular in the countryside. They were brought under Brahmanical influence later, but Brahminization remained partial and incomplete. In fact there were large numbers of non-Brahmins among the local Christians and they continued their caste practices even after conversion

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to Christianity. Several clauses in the Synod of Diamper have been framed to prevent them from using traditional names and rituals, and worshipping old images.

The early Christians who arrived in Kerala could have been the followers of St. Thomas the Apostle who worked in Syria and Persia. It is natural that they were proud of their connection with the Apostle, and retained his name in their folk memory, but that does not mean that the Apostle himself came to Kerala. At any rate, such claims about Brahmanical origin and conversion directly by the Apostle, that are in conflict with all historical evidence, are flaunted often to promote snobbery and notions of caste pride. It is also likely that in course of time the memory of another leader called Thomas came to be confused with that of the Apostle.

In fact the early Christians did not even undertake the mission to convert others. That was done by the European missionaries of the colonial age. The involvement of early Christians in trade and court politics cannot be underestimated, but their interaction with other locals had been peaceful and friendly, for many centuries. They behaved as loyal subjects of the native rulers and good neighbors of the Hindu population. This is demonstrated by the Syrian copper plates of the 9th century and several records of later times. As a result, they enjoyed the titles and privileges usually associated with aristocratic Nayars. They even resisted the attempts of the Portuguese to force them to follow the Roman church, as illustrated by the Koonen Cross episode.

Barring the obsession with the St. Thomas legend, these essays offer very good material for students of Kerala history. For example the first essay itself contains much new information, culled out from recent researches, about the advent of Brahmins in Kerala, and the distribution of their settlements. Though the second essay is also concerned with the legitimation of the St. Thomas legend, it carries authentic data on the discovery of the early Roman coins in Kerala in places like Eyyal, Kottayam, Valluvalli, Mala,