

The Mission of St. Thomas

By Manoj Das

To-day July 3, is the 19th death Centenary of St. Thomas. A special commemorative stamp in the saint's honour is being released in Ernakulam to-day.

"On Palm Sunday we arrived at a very noble city of India called Quilon, where the whole world's pepper is produced..... The Saracens are not the proprietors, but the Christians of St. Thomas, and these latter are the masters of the public weighing office."

This record is left by J. de Marignolli, the Pope's Legate, who visited Quilon in 1348. At a time when acute conflict between Christianity and other religions marked the history of several areas of the world, India not only provided the Christian faith with a safe harbour, but also she treated the faithful with discernment and dignity.

We must remember that this was hundreds of years prior to

Christianity gaining official recognition in Europe. The Syrian Christians of India—so called because the apostle St. Thomas who initiated them came from Syria—lived unchallenged by any other sect of Christians for 1,400 years, till the Portuguese arrived on the scene in the 15th century and tried to 'reform' the local Christians in the light of their Latin Catholicism.

The life, travels and the activities of St. Thomas, although not the exact circumstance of his death, have by now gained the firm sanction of history, emerging from legends and folklore.

Renowned Fathers like St. Ephrem the Syrian and St. Gregory of Tours have compared his mission to those of St. Peter in Rome, St. Andrew in Epirus and St. John in Ephesus. By 9th century his fame had reached all parts of the Christian world and that impelled Alfred the Great of England to send a

delegation to India to visit the saint's tomb.

When St. Thomas touched the Malabar coast in the 1st century A. D., there was already a prosperous Jewish community settled there. (The first batch of Jews are believed to have come there in King Solomon's ships in 1,000 B. C.). Legend, indeed, has it that the saint was received by a Jew girl. If it was so it was most significant. The scene of bitterness between the Jews and the Christians lay far away. On the sanatana soil of India, it was in fitness of its tradition that the Jews who had themselves been cordially received by it long ago should go forward to receive the herald of a new message.

Historians are yet to delve into the mystery of fascination that was India to the aspiring people of the far away lands. As Rev. C. E. Abraham writes: "Archaeological evidence points to the fact that there were diffe-

rent waves of migration from Western Asia to the Malabar coast and that the immigrants received a cordial reception at the hands of the ruling princes of Kerala. Certain copper plates, probably, belonging to the 9th century, and containing charters of privileges granted by these princes, testify to the high position enjoyed by Christians among the people of the land. The Persian crosses (or the so-called 'Thomas Crosses') with inscriptions in Pahlavi, one found in St. Thomas Mount, Madras, and two in a church in Kottayam in Travancore, are evidence of the connection of the Malabar Church with the Church in Persia."

Like the Jewish settlement near Cochin, the Christian community of Malabar had the privilege of a long span of undisturbed life in the turbulent Middle Ages and their Church was visited by a large number of foreigners. Among them was Marco Polo of 13th century. Through Marco's father and uncle, Nicolo and Mafeo Polo, the Italian officers at the court of the great Kubla Khan of

Cathay (China), the Khan had requested the Pope to send as many Christian preachers as possible to his country to enlighten his people. The Pope had been able to convince only two preachers to accompany the Polos in their journey into the mysterious East. And even these two deserted the Polos when they heard of a war on the way to China. Marco must have been amazed to learn that Christianity had been cultivated on a neighbouring soil 1,200 years before Kubla Khan's unsuccessful effort to give it to his people!

The memory of St. Thomas takes us back to the early days of Christianity, and also to the noon of a particular phase of Kerala's history when it had prolific trade and cultural relations with Greece, Rome, China, Egypt and Babylon etc. through its prosperous towns like Quilon, Cranganore, Cochin, Calicut and Cannanore. Above all else it reminds of a wonderful India of yore, ready to appreciate and accommodate every aspect of man's quest for goodness and truth.