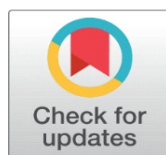


THE CHRISTIAN LEGACY OF NILAKKAL: A HISTORICAL INQUIRY INTO ITS EARLY COMMUNITY AND FOURTEENTH-CENTURY DIASPORA

Sunitha Santhan¹

¹Assistant Professor of History, Alphonsa College, Kottayam, Pala, Kerala, India



DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.4195](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.4195)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2023 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

Christianity in Kerala can be traced back to the beginning of the Christian era. According to tradition, St. Thomas is believed to have arrived at Malayankara near Cranganore in 52 AD, where he preached the Gospel and established seven churches in Malabar. These churches were located in Cranganore, Quilon, Niranam, Nilakkal, Kokamangalam, Kottakavu-Parur, and Palayur. Among these early Christian centres, where the Apostle is said to have evangelized and founded Christian communities, Nilakkal stands out as the only site that remains uninhabited and desolate. Historical evidence suggests that thriving Christian and Hindu communities coexisted in Nilakkal until the mid-fourteenth century. Various traditions and accounts exist regarding the mass exodus of the Christian community from Nilakkal. This study examines the presence of the Christian community in Nilakkal and explores the factors contributing to their large-scale migration to other parts of Kerala by the end of the fourteenth century.

Keywords: St Thomas, Nilakkal, Gospel, Pamba, Exodus, Ecumenical Church

1. INTRODUCTION

Kerala is widely recognized as one of the most religiously diverse states in India. Even in antiquity, the region provided a conducive environment for the growth of indigenous religions such as Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, as well as for the establishment of foreign religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Christianity was introduced in Kerala in the first century AD, nearly three centuries before it received official recognition in Europe or became the state religion of the Roman Empire. According to tradition, St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, is credited with introducing Christianity to India. It is believed that he arrived at Malayankara, an area between Paravoor and Cranganore, around 52 AD. Subsequently, he is said to have established seven churches or community of Christians in Cranganore, Quilon, Niranam, Nilakkal, Kokamangalam, Kottakavu-Parur, and Palayur. Later, an additional church was founded at Thiruvithamcode, which is often referred to as a "half church." St. Thomas is also believed to have erected crosses in these locations for worship and baptized numerous converts. His missionary journey eventually took him to the Coromandel Coast, where he is thought to have met his martyrdom, reportedly being stoned by a crowd and pierced by a lance wielded by a Brahmin. His tomb is located in Mylapore, on the eastern coast of India.

The seven churches established by St. Thomas played a pivotal role in the growth of Christianity in Kerala. These communities maintained a unique identity by blending local traditions with Christian beliefs. The St. Thomas Christians,

also known as "Nasranis," continue to uphold many ancient traditions passed down through generations. They were well-regarded by the local rulers and were given privileges that allowed them to flourish as an influential group. The early Christians were known for their involvement in trade, agriculture, and administrative services. Their contributions to Kerala's economy were significant, as they actively participated in commercial activities and land management. By integrating into the local culture while preserving their religious identity, they established a lasting legacy that continues to influence Kerala's diverse and multicultural society today.

The presence of these churches is not only a matter of religious faith but also of historical importance. They reflect the early interactions between Indian culture and Christianity, showcasing Kerala's long-standing tradition of religious harmony. These historical places continue to be centres of faith and pilgrimage for Christians across the world. The traditions and historical records associated with these churches highlight the deep-rooted Christian heritage of Kerala, making them an integral part of India's religious and cultural history.

The seven locations where St. Thomas is believed to have established Christian communities were significant centres of commerce and home to thriving Jewish settlements, a community that played a crucial role in the trade networks of the time. Jewish traders are believed to have arrived in Kerala during the reign of King Solomon, drawn by the region's abundant supply of spices, especially pepper, which was highly valued in the Middle East and Europe. Over the centuries, Jewish merchants became an integral part of Kerala's trade networks, fostering strong commercial ties with various civilizations, including the Romans, Arabs, and Chinese. The Jews of Kerala were primarily engaged in the trade of spices, precious stones, silk, and other luxury goods. The rulers granted them privileges, including tax exemptions and autonomy in managing their affairs, which facilitated their economic growth.

The presence of Jewish communities may have facilitated the Apostle's missionary endeavours. Notably, six of these early Christian settlements were situated along the coastal regions, while Nilakkal was the only inland community, located in the Western Ghats.

2. NILAKKAL AS A CENTRE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

Nilakkal was the fourth centre in Malabar where St. Thomas is believed to have preached the Gospel and established a Christian community. It is situated in the present-day Pathanamthitta district of Kerala. Historically referred to as Chayal, Nilakkal was a flourishing commercial hub during the early centuries of the Christian era. Strategically located along the trade route connecting the Arabian Sea to the Coromandel Coast, it served as a key entry point to the Pandyan Kingdom and maintained trade relations with prominent centres such as Mathura, Ramanathapuram, and Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu, as well as major port cities in Kerala, including Kollam, Niranam, and Purakkadu. Spices cultivated in Nilakkal were exported to international markets through these ports. The region also facilitated the transport of goods from the Pandyan Kingdom to Kerala. The discovery of Roman coins in nearby areas such as Chengannur and Ranni attests to the vibrant trade activity in Nilakkal.ⁱ Additionally, references in Sangam literature, including *Chilappathikaram* and *Pathittupattu*, further substantiate the economic significance of this trade centre.

As a border post and a thriving commercial hub between the Chera and Pandya kingdoms, Nilakkal attracted a considerable Jewish population engaged in the direct procurement of pepper and other spices from local farmers. These goods were transported via the Pamba River to Nalkynda, near Niranam, for trade. It is believed that St. Thomas arrived at Nilakkal along this trade route in 54 AD, en route to Madurai, the capital of the Pandyan Kingdom, to minister to the Jewish community residing there.ⁱⁱ During this period, Nilakkal was under the rule of the Ay dynasty, whose territorial boundaries likely extended along the southern side of the Pamba River up to Tiruvalla, a region that later became part of Venad. Following the Chera-Chola war in 1085 AD, Nilakkal came under the control of the Pandyan Kingdom. From 1102 AD onward, the Pandalam Raja, serving as a local representative of the Pandyas, administered the Nilakkal region. According to the *Ramban Songs*,ⁱⁱⁱ St. Thomas is believed to have ministered among the Hindu population residing in the twelve suburban villages of Nilakkal, converting a significant number of Jews and Vellala Chettis, likely from the Pandyan region. His apostolic mission in Nilakkal is said to have lasted for approximately one year, during which he reportedly converted around 2,800 individuals. As part of his missionary activities, he erected a cross and established a church to serve the newly formed Christian community. Subsequently, St. Thomas revisited the seven churches he had founded and returned to Nilakkal, where he remained for another year before departing for Mylapore in 69 AD.^{iv} The Christian community in Nilakkal continued to grow over the centuries, preserving the traditions and customs introduced by the Apostle.

In the initial phase, there may not have been a formal church structure in Nilakkal, and the early Christian community likely gathered for prayer and worship before the cross erected by St. Thomas. Devotees are believed to have lit lamps,

made offerings, and conducted burials near the site of the cross. Over time, a small thatched prayer hall was constructed at the site to facilitate communal worship. The construction of permanent church buildings in Kerala is thought to have commenced following the arrival of Mar Sabor Iso and Mar Proth from Persia in 822 AD at Quilon.^v These bishops are credited with establishing churches at Kurakkenanikollam, Chengannur, Thevalakkara, Nilakkal, Niranam, Kadamattam, Paravoor, and Malayattoor.^{vi} Towards the end of his life, Mar Sabor Iso is believed to have resided in the Nilakkal church, where he was eventually buried. His tomb became a site of pilgrimage for the Syrian Christian community, underscoring Nilakkal's continued significance in the ecclesiastical history of Kerala.

The Christian community in Nilakkal thrived until the mid-fourteenth century, after which the area was abandoned due to various factors. Historical records frequently reference Nilakkal as a settlement concealed within the forested regions of Central Travancore. Several accounts document its existence and later decline. Notably, Lt. Ward and G. Conner, who visited the site in 1818, provided a detailed description of Nilakkal in their work, *Memoir of the Survey of the Travancore and Cochin States* as follows:

Nellakkull a pagoda though in a hollow is on an elevated site, about it are the apparent ruins of a village, lies E. by N. 11 miles from Perrunad, this place by Syrians, is called also Shail where they say that Saint Thomas in his progress through the country fixed one of the seven crosses of which no traces are to be seen, it is also a depot for timber, and a short distance from the pagoda is a tank of great depth, it is surrounded by hills and forests infested by elephants and other wild animals, the path to it is circuitous leading over ridges covered with lofty forest.^{vii}

Further references to Nilakkal appear in various scholarly works, including T. Whitehouse's *Lingering of Light in a Dark Land* (1873, p. 391), V. Nagaayya's *State Manual* (1906, Vol. 2, p. 235), T. K. Velupillai's *Thiruvithamkur State Manual*, T. K. Joseph's *The Indian Antiquary*, London (1923), and Fr. Bernarath Thoma's *Marthomakristhiyanikal* (1916). These sources collectively provide valuable historical insights into Nilakkal's significance as an early Christian settlement and its eventual decline.

3. THE MASS MIGRATION FROM NILAKKAL

The exodus from Nilakkal is believed to have occurred between the 13th and 14th centuries, with multiple traditions narrating the flight of both Christian and Hindu communities from the region. One such tradition attributes the destruction of the Nilakkal church and its surrounding settlements to an attack by mysterious creatures referred to in local parlance as *Vakrapuli* and *Perumpatta*. However, no definitive explanation for these terms has been provided. A more historically plausible account suggests that Nilakkal and its surrounding areas were plundered by two groups of marauders led by Vikram Puli Tevar and Paraya Pattam, who were colloquially referred to as *Vakrapuli* and *Perumpatta*, respectively.^{viii} These groups, likely belonging to the Marava community of Tamil Nadu, engaged in widespread looting of temples, churches, and residences in the high ranges during the 13th century, compelling the inhabitants to flee.

Following the decline of the Chera dynasty, Kerala was fragmented into smaller territories ruled by regional chieftains (Naduvazhis). During this period, Nilakkal was under the control of the Pandalam Rajas, who lacked the military strength to resist incursions from the neighbouring Pandya Kingdom. Historical records from the Tirunelveli district, which describe Maravarman Kulasekhara (r. 1268–1310) as *Cheranai Venra* (the conqueror of the Chera land) and *Kollam Konda* (the ruler who captured Quilon), suggest that the Pandyas launched an expedition to Venad, capturing Quilon.^{ix} Given Nilakkal's strategic location along this route, it is likely that the region faced recurrent raids and looting by Pandyan forces, prompting its inhabitants to migrate to safer territories.

Another possible cause of the Nilakkal exodus is the South Indian invasion led by Malik Kafur. His army occupied Madurai on April 24, 1311, and, given Nilakkal's proximity to Madurai and its status as a thriving trade centre,^x it is plausible that Kafur's forces looted the area. Local traditions reference Muslim invasions from the Madurai region, further corroborating this possibility. The continuous cycle of raids and plundering made life untenable for the residents of Nilakkal, forcing them to seek refuge in the neighbouring territories of Thekkumkur.

The final blow to Nilakkal's settlement came with the Great Flood of 1341, one of the most catastrophic floods recorded in Kerala's history. This deluge devastated the remnants of the population that had survived the earlier Pandyan and Muslim incursions, leading to a large-scale abandonment of the township. Many residents fled to other regions, utilizing water routes and hill tracks to escape. Oral histories and family genealogies of Christian communities in Thumpamon, Ayroor, Kanjirapally, and Niranam trace their ancestry to Nilakkal, indicating a widespread dispersion of its former inhabitants.

The *Sasthan Pattu*, a local ballad, recounts that before leaving Nilakkal, Christian residents hid valuable possessions—including boxes, copper and palm-leaf documents, bronze lamps, stone crosses, and bells—in a pond near their church.^{xi} A group of Christian refugees also carried with them a revered image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which they had venerated for generations. They later found sanctuary in the hills near Kanjirapally, where they are believed to have established the earliest Christian place of worship in the region. Over time, Nilakkal's once-thriving township, along with its church and marketplace, was completely abandoned and reclaimed by the forest. Many of its former inhabitants resettled along the coastal regions of the Periyar and Pampa Rivers, as well as near Vembanad Lake, contributing to the expansion of Christian communities in these areas.

4. THE UNVEILING OF THE NILAKKAL SITE.

In 1887, Pulicot Joseph Mar Dvanosius, the Metropolitan, submitted a petition to Sree Moolam Thirunal Maharaja of Travancore, requesting the restoration of the site where the original Nilakkal church was believed to have been constructed. Despite receiving assurances, these efforts did not yield any tangible results. In 1957, Father Thomas O.I.C. discovered remnants of the ancient church, including graves covered with granite slabs, house sites, and burial grounds. The Nilakkal site, situated within a dense forest, was in proximity to the Nilakkal temple and a state-owned agricultural farm. In his attempt to reclaim the site for Christian worship, Father Thomas constructed a hut atop a tree and resided there for an extended period as a form of protest, demanding the reconstruction of the Nilakkal church. However, objections raised by the Kerala Government's Forest Department ultimately led to his departure from the site.^{xii}

By the 1970s, various Christian denominations collectively sought to acquire a plot of land from the state government for the construction of a new church at Nilakkal. However, this initiative faced strong resistance from certain Hindu organizations, as the proposed site was located within the vicinity of the Sabarimala Temple, a highly venerated pilgrimage center for Hindus in Kerala. After prolonged discussions and negotiations, a special Christian committee agreed in July 1983 to accept an alternative site, located approximately 3.5 kilometers away from the original site of the ancient church. Consequently, on April 8, 1984, the St. Thomas Ecumenical Church at Nilakkal was established as a collaborative effort of multiple Christian denominations, including the Malankara Orthodox Church, Jacobite Church, Mar Thoma Church, Roman Catholic Church, Syro-Malankara Church, and the Church of South India.

5. CONCLUSION

Nilakkal, located 57 kilometers east of present-day Ranny, was a flourishing Christian centre from the early centuries of the Christian era until the fourteenth century. Among the various Malabar centres where the Apostle St. Thomas is believed to have preached the Gospel and established Christian communities, Nilakkal remains the only site that has become depopulated and desolate over time. In 1984, to commemorate the missionary activities of St. Thomas in Nilakkal, a new church, the St. Thomas Ecumenical Church, was constructed through the collaborative efforts of multiple Christian denominations. This church stands as a symbol of unity among Christian churches and exemplifies interfaith harmony. Its central message is one of love, peace, and fraternity, reinforcing the possibility of maintaining unity among Christian denominations while also respecting the religious sentiments of other faiths.

However, the newly constructed church is located at a considerable distance from the original site of the ancient Christian settlement. The historical Nilakkal site lies deep within the forest, where local discoveries have revealed house sites, graveyards, and other remnants of early Christian habitation. Systematic archaeological excavations and scholarly research in this area could provide significant insights into the life of the early Christian community, their trade activities, and their role in contributing to the economic prosperity of the region. Such findings would further enrich the historical understanding of Kerala's past and its diverse cultural heritage.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

End Notes

A.C Perumalil, The Apostles in India, Xavier Teachers' Training Institute, Patna, 1971, p100

C.G.Varghese, St Thomas In India, Readers Publications, 2000, p.151

This song is believed to have been originally composed by Maliekal Thomas Ramban II of Niranam, in ancient Malayaam language mixed with Tamil and was not available in writing. In 1601 AD, another Thomas Maliekal Ramban of the same family, and 48th in line, edited it and gave its present written form for the benefit of all.

C.G.Varghese, op cit , p 232

P.E. Easo, Syrian Christian Traditions, Mumbai, 1992 , p 20

Ibid , p 21

Lts. Ward and Conner, (ed), Memoir of the Survey of the Travancore and Cochin States, Vol II, Government of Kerala, Thiruvanthapuram, 1994, p. 136

P.E. Easo, op.cit, p. 22

A. Sreedhara Menon, A Survey of Kerala History, DC Books, 2007, P.142

K. U John, Keralathile Kristeeya Sabhakal, 1995, p.66

C.G.Varghese, op cit, p.152

P.E. Easo, op cit, p. 24