

ANCIENT TRADE ROUTES AND THE MISSION OF  
THE APOSTLE THOMAS IN INDIA

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## ANCIENT TRADE ROUTES AND THE MISSION OF THE APOSTLE THOMAS IN INDIA

### Introduction

This country is the birthplace of Hinduism and Buddhism, home to one sixth of all the people currently alive on the planet today, and was the target of William Carey. India may seem to be a country that has only recently been the target of Christian mission activity, but it has a Christian heritage that is almost 2,000 years old. By the time that William Carey came to India in 1794, India had been an active target of Western missionary efforts for four hundred years. Before the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498, the Syrian Church sent bishops and maintained contact with India for over one thousand years. Before the missions of the Portuguese and the Syrians was the mission of one of the twelve, Thomas. Sundararaj Manickam writes, “It is generally believed that India was one of the few countries where Christianity was preached as early as the beginning of the Christian era.”<sup>1</sup>

The mission field for Thomas was very different from that of Peter and Paul. Paul Thomas writes:

The Roman world was crying for a religion that appealed to the soul of man and Christianity came to its aid. But in India things were quite different. Hinduism in its comprehensive synthesis catered to the needs of all. . . Thus the Apostle of the East was not preaching to a world seeking spiritual guidance, but to a people intent on teaching others a spiritual way of life.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas would preach Christ before kings and commoners, merchants and maids, and would establish a church that traces its lineage to his arrival. The local rulers would welcome Christianity in South India over two hundred years before Constantine declared himself a Christian. However, for approximately eight hundred years, contact between the Thomas

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<sup>1</sup>Sundararaj Manickam, *Studies in Missionary History: Reflections on a Culture-Contact* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1988), 34.

<sup>2</sup>Paul Thomas, *Christians and Christianity in India and Pakistan: A General Survey of the Progress of Christianity in India from Apostolic Times to the Present Day* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1954), 13.

Christians of India and the West would be non-existent, and little of Indian Christianity would be known outside of South Asia.

Seven questions will guide the paper. First, would someone in first century Palestine have any knowledge of India? Second, how could Thomas have travelled to India? Third, how could Thomas be in two opposite regions of India? Fourth, what evidence is there that Thomas was in northwest India? Fifth, what evidence is there that Thomas was in south India? Sixth, why is it important that Thomas was in India? Seventh, how could the Thomas tradition affect strategy in India and other areas? One underlying theme appears throughout the paper, the importance of trade routes. Ancient invasion routes became ancient trade routes. Emphasis on ancient trade routes and ancient empires before the first century will assist in better understanding the first three questions.

### **Pre-Thomas Western Contact with India**

The first question to be addressed is how much knowledge of India would someone living in the Roman Empire in the first century have. Alexander the Great had conquered territory in India, to the Indus River valley, a part of which belonged to the Persian Empire.<sup>3</sup> Yet, even before Alexander, the Greeks were familiar with India. To the Western mind, what is understood about the ancient, Middle Eastern empires centers on expansion to the West, not to the East. The Fertile Crescent, located in the Middle East, was the center of the great empires prior to Alexander. The Tigris-Euphrates River valley was the heart of the Sumer Empire, both Babylonian empires, and the Medo-Persian empire. Uncertainty exists about the contact that the Indians would have had with the Sumer or Babylonian empire, but not with the Persian Empire. One more group of people needs to be mentioned when discussing early Indian history, the Aryans. The Aryans are generally believed to be the first group to invade India.

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<sup>3</sup>Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., *India*, Vol. 21, in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago, IL: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc, 1993), 39.

The second and third questions are answered by examining the ancient invasion and trade routes that existed. The Aryans came through mountain passes to the Indus River Valley. The Persians followed the Aryan route and came by sea to northwestern India. The Greeks used the same route of the Persians and are credited with discovering the seasonal change in winds. Rome did not conquer India, but used the Greek knowledge to have extensive trade with India.

### **Aryan Invasions of India**

The Aryans are the first group believed to have invaded India. The Aryans appear to have covered large territories because the term “Aryan” is less a racial designation and more of a linguistic designation. Damodar Kosambi writes, “Western scholars from the nineteenth century onwards used the word Aryan to denote a considerable group of closely related languages: Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, the Teutonic, Slav and Romance types.”<sup>4</sup> The languages cover Europe and India, with a linguistic gap in the Middle East. By tracking linguistic changes, the possibility exists to track Aryan expansion.

The first major group of Aryan invaders came from the Iranian plateau approximately 1750 BC. A second group invaded around 1000 BC. “[T]he historical movements of the sub-group that affects India can be traced with fair certainty, in two great waves of pastoral tribesmen originating in the Khorezm region.”<sup>5</sup> The Khorezm region is located north of modern Iran in the country of Uzbekistan. The Aryans were able to conquer “isolated primitive groups” because of two reasons, superior technology and simpler language.<sup>6</sup> The Aryans did not leave buildings for archeologists to find. They left a simpler language and new technologies to mark the invasions.

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<sup>4</sup>Damodar D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1956), 75.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 78.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 79-80.

Prior to the Aryan invasions, there is evidence to support the existence of trade between ancient India and Babylon. “It is not impossible that copper, which was introduced late into the Punjab civilization revealed by the finds at Mohenjo-Daro, was imported from Babylonia.”<sup>7</sup> The Punjab region of India provided the easiest natural route to the west and allowed the Aryans to maintain contact with the regions they came from. See Figure A1 in Appendix 1 for a map of the probable invasion routes.

To proceed from it to the basin of the Ganges, one must go up the easternmost tributary of the Indus, the Sutlej, and come on to the upper Jumna above Delhi. There is not the least hillock to mark the watershed, but there is not a wide interval between the spurs of the Himalaya and the northern point of the desert which extends to the Arabian Sea. This passage is a strategic point of the greatest importance; the destinies of India have been many times decided there.<sup>8</sup>

The route ran through southern Pakistan, the Indian states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab, and Delhi.

### **The Persian Empire and India**

The Persian Empire stretched from modern day Greece in the west to northwest India in the east. In the heart of the Persian Empire lie the ancient trade routes that connected east and west. Richard Frye describes this region:

In the center of the Iranian plateau are two desolate salt deserts, the Dasht-I Kavir and the Dasht-I Lut. They act as a barrier between east and west, diverting large groups of migrating peoples either eastward towards India or westward towards Mesopotamia. [...] The road headed for the Iranian plateau through modern Kirmanshah, Hamadan, Tehran, and then followed the northern edge of the Kavir, at Heart branching north-east to Merv, Bukhara, Samarkand and on to China, or turning south to Seistan, east to Qandahar and over the mountains to the plains of the Indus river. These routes have been not only the time-honored roads of trade but also of invasion.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Paul Masson-Oursel, Helena de Willman-Grabowska and Phillippe Stern, *Ancient India and Indian Civilization*, ed. C. K. Ogden (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1934), 19.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 6.

<sup>9</sup>Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia* (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1963), 7.

The Medes and Persians used these routes to expand the empire. The emperor responsible for the initial expansion is Cyrus. Cyrus first looked east before conquering the Babylonians. A. T. Olmstead writes, “From Bactria, the most eastern of the truly Iranian lands, Cyrus looked across the boundary river, the Cophen, into the territory of their cousins, the Indians...At this date, then, this far corner of India first came under the control of the Iranians.”<sup>10</sup>

Cyrus was not the only Persian Emperor to expand into India; Darius continued to expand into northern India. Darius sent spies into India, one of whom was a Greek who published an account of the expedition. “The information furnished by the spies induced the king to attempt more eastern conquests. Western India was subdued and sometime before 513 had been formed into the satrapy of Hindush, which before long furnished an annual tribute of three hundred and sixty talents of gold dust. Trade by sea was opened up.”<sup>11</sup> The Indians not only contributed money to the Persian Empire, but also provided cavalry. Because Greece and India were part of the Persian Empire, trade and information passed between the two extremes of the empire. Olmstead explains, “There was enough contact with the West almost to the end of the fifth century for Herodotus to be able to declare that in number the Indians were far greater than all the other peoples known to the Greeks. . . .”<sup>12</sup>

In many ways, the Persian Empire is similar to the Roman Empire. Both encompassed large areas of various people groups. Both used innovative technology to conquer and expand their empires. Both established strong, local administrative regions to rule their vast empires. Communication flowed easily in both empires. Roman and Persian structures encouraged vigorous trade and the exchange of ideas throughout the entirety of their empires. In both empires, Jews spread throughout the lands and established small communities in the major cities.

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<sup>10</sup>A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), 48-49.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, 144-145.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 292.

## Alexander, Greece, and India

The Greeks and Persians battled against one another several times before Alexander marched east in 334 B. C. Indians served in the Persian army. The Indians provided the cavalry and because of their fighting abilities, they served close to the emperor. Only the emperor's personal bodyguards, the Immortals, served closer.<sup>13</sup> Z. F. Griffin writes, "Herodotus, the Greek historian who lived between 400 and 500 B. C., speaks of the Hindus as the greatest nation of the ages."<sup>14</sup> Alexander's march east began in the Spring of 334 B. C. and ended with his death on June 10, 323 B. C. Others who followed him would use the pass that Alexander used to invade India. Robin Lane Fox states, "Throughout history, invaders have spilled easily from the Kabul valley across into the plains of the Punjab. Alexander was set on the former route of the Persians, common later to the Parthians, Kushans and Arabs, Mongols, Moguls, and the Greek kings who entered India again in his wake."<sup>15</sup> Even after Alexander the Great died, his successors maintained regular contact with the Punjab region of India. Asoka, the first Indian emperor, describes five Greek kings who were his neighbors.<sup>16</sup>

## Roman and Indian Trade

Stephen Neill notes, "Ample evidence exists to show the range and vigour of the commerce between India and the western world in the first two centuries of our era."<sup>17</sup> The discovery of the monsoon winds eased travel and increased trade between the Roman world and the Indian world. George Smith explains, "In the year 50 A.D., the pilot Hippalus revealed the semi-annual reversal of the wind system of the Indian Ocean which is called by the Arabic word

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Z. F. Griffin, *India and Daily Life in Bengal* (Boston, MA: Morning Star Publishing House, 1903), 14.

<sup>15</sup>Robin Lane Fox, *The Search for Alexander* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), 310.

<sup>16</sup>Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., *India*, 41.

<sup>17</sup>Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 30.

for ‘a season,’ *moussin* or monsoon.”<sup>18</sup> Neill believes that the dating for the discovery is actually late. He writes, “[T]here is reason to think that the process started a good deal earlier than this (the reign of Claudius), perhaps even before the beginning of the Christian era.”<sup>19</sup> Trade existed between Southern India and Greece in the first century. Rome and India had an economic relationship. Martin Goodman states, “Some luxuries, such as spices and silks, were brought from China and India, and from Arabia.”<sup>20</sup> Control of the trade routes was in Rome’s interest. Goodman indicates two different trade routes to India. “Greed for control of the lucrative incense route, and the sea trade between India and Egypt, led to the invasion of Arabia Felix (Sabaea) by the prefect of Egypt, Aelius Gallus, in 25-24 BC, but after the failure of that expedition Roman strategic interest in the region was minimal.”<sup>21</sup> Egyptian ports on the Red Sea were the main ports of entry for the East-West trade. Just as the gospel traveled to Rome using the established trade routes, the Gospel spread to India via trade, brought by common people sharing their faith.

### **The Thomas Traditions of India**

The Thomas Christians of India claim that the Apostle Thomas visited the northwestern and southern regions of India. The primary source for the northern tradition is the Gnostic work *The Acts of Thomas*. The fourth question will examine the validity of *The Acts of Thomas*. The fifth question will examine the oral traditions that comprise the southern tradition. By comparing the plausible timeline of the two traditions, the third question will be answered. Alternative theories and apprehensions will be presented. The alternative theories and

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<sup>18</sup>George Smith, *The Conversion of India: From Pantaenus to the Present Time A.D. 193 - 1893* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004), 9.

<sup>19</sup>Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, 31.

<sup>20</sup>Martin Goodman, *The Roman World: 44 BC - AD 180* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 143.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 254.



apprehensions will be counter-argued. Figure A2 in Appendix 1 is a map of Gondopharnes's kingdom. Figure A3 in Appendix 1 is a map of the Kerala state in southern India.

### **The Northern Tradition**

The northern tradition is largely based on the Gnostic work of *The Acts of Thomas*. *The Acts of Thomas* was written between AD 220 and 250. The knowledge of northwestern India and the discovery of coins bearing the name of the Indo-Parthian king Gondopharnes have caused scholars to reconsider the possibility of the Apostle Thomas in India.

**Discussion of *The Acts of Thomas*.** *The Acts of Thomas* is not a later recording of oral history. The events recorded include many supernatural events and unscriptural teachings. Two supernatural events are apparent: a donkey speaking and the king's brother returning from the dead. The king had been giving Thomas money to build a palace. Thomas used the money to help the poor. When the king asked to see the palace, Thomas pointed to the poor. The king jailed Thomas and set an execution date. The king's brother died before Thomas was executed and was taken to heaven to see the palace Thomas has build for the king. The brother returned from the dead to tell the king what he saw in heaven. The king released Thomas and followed Christ. The common theme that all sexual intercourse is evil, even in marriage, persists throughout the book and is clearly contrary to Scripture.

Another incident is the division of the known world among the Apostles. Eleven Apostles are named. Matthias is not named among the Apostles. "They divided the countries among them, in order that each one of them might preach in the region which fell to him and in the place to which his Lord sent him. And India fell by lot and division to Judas Thomas the Apostle."<sup>22</sup> A problem with the last sentence is that the Holy Spirit was not leading the Apostles as He does in Acts after Pentecost. Lots were drawn in Acts 1:26, "And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles." The selection of

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<sup>22</sup> A. F. J. Klinj, *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, 2nd Edition (Boston: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2003), 17.

Matthias is the only event in Acts that lots were drawn to determine the direction of the group. Theoretically, Luke would have recorded an event that took place prior to the selection of Matthias. Another possibility is that the event recorded in *The Acts of Thomas* did not fit the theme of Luke and was excluded for thematic reasons. Writing was expensive in the first century and Luke's focus in Acts is the gospel coming to Rome. Neill's position would be not to completely disregard *The Acts of Thomas* as pure fiction. F. C. Burkitt dismisses *The Acts of Thomas* as fiction, but useful. Burkitt states, "But the real interest of the *Acts* is not historical, any more than the interest of *Lear* or *Hamlet* is historical. The interest lies in the prayers and sermons of Judas Thomas."<sup>23</sup>

**Discussion of Historical Evidence.** Eckhard Schnabel notes that many scholars believe that there are some historical facts in *The Acts of Thomas*.<sup>24</sup> Particularly he notes, "One detail that clearly refers to an Indian context is the reference to Gondophernes (Gondophares), the Indo-Parthian ruler in Taxila between A.D. 20 and 46. Gondophernes was accepted as a historical figure only when archaeologists discovered coins whose legend included his name."<sup>25</sup> For a list of the multiple spellings of Gondopharnes, see Appendix 2. Commenting on Gondopharnes, E. J. Rapson states, "The legend of St. Thomas has thus been furnished with an historical setting which is chronologically possible. The fact of St Thomas's visit to the court of Gondopharnes may be doubted; the story remains to show that the fame of this king has spread to the West."<sup>26</sup> Stephen Neill doubts that the Apostle Thomas came to Northwestern India. Neill states what can be regarded as facts concerning Thomas:

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<sup>23</sup>F. Crawford Burkitt, *Early Christianity Outside the Roman Empire* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1899), 70.

<sup>24</sup>Schnabel cites the following scholars regarding the historicity of Thomas in India: Medlycott, Rooney, Vadakkekara, Barbe, Dahlmann, G. Bornkamm, Dihle, J. K. Elliott, H. J. W. Drijvers, Posch, Bivar, Farquhar, Waldmann, V. Smith, Grafe, Dar, Amjad-Ali, and Moffett.

<sup>25</sup>Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, Vol. 1, 2 vols. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 883.

<sup>26</sup>E. J. Rapson, "The Scythian and Parthian Invaders", Vol. 1, in *The Cambridge History of India: Ancient India*, ed. E. J. Rapson (New York: Cambridge at the University Press, 1935), 579.

Almost certainly trade was active between the realm of Gondopharnes and the lands of Central Asia and of the Middle East, both across the mountain passes and from the Persian Gulf by sea to the mouth of the Indus. It is probable that there would be communities of Mesopotamian merchants in the great cities in the area, and especially in the capital. The presence of Christians among them at an early date is possible, though there is no direct evidence to support the suggestion...Persian Christian merchants, returning to their homeland, may have carried with them recollections of the time that they had spent in India, and the name of the king under whom they had lived. The presence of Christians in cities at or near the mouth of the Indus cannot be regarded as unlikely. Traffic between the Persian Gulf and that area has always been active. If Christian merchants had come from Persia and settled in that area, they would almost certainly bring with them the Thomas tradition...Early Christian communities, if they ever existed, may have been gradually eliminated, as the Arabs took complete possession of the Indian seas.<sup>27</sup>

Schnabel notes that the visit of a Greek philosopher named Apollonius of Tyana to Taxila is accepted as historical even though the account was written 150 years after his visit. He argues, “We should accept the *possibility* that Thomas could have come to India and preached the gospel in Greek there. This means that *The Acts of Thomas* could indeed preserve authentic information about such a missionary visit.”<sup>28</sup> The possibility for Thomas to have reached northwestern India using existing trade routes is entirely possible. Julius Richter believes that the Apostle Thomas was in northwest India. He writes, “It may therefore be inferred with certainty from the apocryphal narrative that in these border lands of North-West India Christian communities were already in existence at the time of the composition of these apocryphal writings, and that such communities traced their origin to the Apostle Thomas.”<sup>29</sup>

The desire to have an Apostle as the founder of the Christian faith is not a new or novel concept. Traditions within the Catholic Church abound with the Apostles establishing churches in various countries around the Mediterranean Sea. Many Christian communities have attempted to show that one of the original Apostles had established a church in their region. The fact that no region west of Syria claims Thomas as their Apostle speaks loudly to the claims of

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<sup>27</sup>Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, 29.

<sup>28</sup>Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 885.

<sup>29</sup>Julius Richter, *A History of Missions in India*, trans. Sydney H. Moore (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co, 1908), 28. The date of the writing of *The Acts of Thomas* is between AD 220-250.

the Eastern Churches. Even the churches at Edessa and Adiabene in Syria do not claim that Thomas planted them. “The connection that the Christians of Edessa claim to have with Thomas consists in the telling of information that Thomas sent Addai as a missionary to their city.”<sup>30</sup> Only one other Apostle is associated with Northwest India. Pantaenus claimed Bartholomew brought Christianity to that region of India. Schnabel disagrees with Pantaenus’s claim, “However, if Pantaenus heard ‘Bar Thoma’ instead of ‘Mar Thoma’—Mar being an oriental honorific title—then the confusion of Thomas with Bartholomew would become understandable and the tradition of a mission to India by the apostle Bartholomew would find an explanation.”<sup>31</sup>

Thomas would have found a community in Taxila much like many other capital cities of the first century AD. Rowena Robinson states, “This was apparently a cosmopolitan kingdom where Greeks, Bactrians, Scythians and Indians interacted. It may well have been a center for a good deal of intellectual activity as it was for commerce.”<sup>32</sup> Thomas could have communicated the gospel in Greek. There is an incident in *The Acts of Thomas* where Thomas chooses to pray in Hebrew and is not understood by the people present. A Hebrew woman, present at the party and playing a flute, hears the prayer. When Thomas’s prayer is answered, she breaks her flute and surrenders to Christ.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Southern Tradition**

The primary reason that the mission of Thomas to Northwest India is disputed is because of the apparent conflicting claims by the Thomas Christians of southern India. All Thomas Christians; whether Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Syrian, Reformed or Protestant, claim to be spiritual descendants of the Apostle Thomas. The Syrian Church is associated with

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<sup>30</sup>Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 886. Addai was a disciple of Thomas similar to Timothy’s relationship with Paul.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid, 887.

<sup>32</sup>Rowena Robinson, *Christians of India* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), 40.

<sup>33</sup>Klinj, *The Acts of Thomas*, 26-42.

Nestorianism and therefore is considered heretical. Dietmar Winkler explains that the labeling of the Syrian church as Nestorian is unjust. He argues, “Thus a heresy is attributed to the East Syriac Church, a heresy the church itself has rejected as incorrect since at least the sixth century.”<sup>34</sup> The Thomas Christians were sought after by the Portuguese at the dawn of exploration and are not considered heretical.

The tradition for Thomas in south India begins with his arrival by sea. The consensus is that Thomas landed near Cranganore (north of modern day Ernakulam on the southwestern tip of India), established seven churches, and was martyred in Mylapore. See Figure A4 in Appendix 1 for a map of south India. The details are more interesting. F. E. Keay states, “According to the commonly accepted tradition St Thomas landed in the year A. D. 52 at the port of Muziris (now Cranganore, not far from Cochin) and began to preach the Gospel.”<sup>35</sup> S. G. Pothan writes, “The time honored tradition so dearly cherished by the Christians of Kerala is, that St. Thomas landed at Malankara near Cranganur in A. D. 52, founded seven churches and established Christian communities...”<sup>36</sup> The Christian community in Kerala claim they are descended from the Apostle Thomas. See Appendix 2 for a list of the various names that Kerala has been known. Neill reports, “Thomas the apostle is represented...as having spent the greater part of his time in India in Kerala and there to have had great success in his mission. Of the seven churches he is said to have founded, all with one exception are to be found not far from the coast and in the area in which to this day Christians form a large part of the population.”<sup>37</sup> The Kerala region of India is where the Portuguese first landed in India. The Portuguese knew of the Thomas Christians from other Europeans who had traveled to India and from Marco Polo’s account. Neill writes, “When the Portuguese arrived in India, they found the Thomas tradition

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<sup>34</sup>Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, trans. Miranda Henry (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 7.

<sup>35</sup>F. E. Keay, *A History of the Syrian Church in India*, 3rd edition (Delhi: I. S. P. C. K., 1960), 1.

<sup>36</sup>S. G. Pothan, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1963), 5.

<sup>37</sup>Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, 33.

widely accepted, and were shown the church at Mylapore in which it was held that the apostle had been buried in a chapel on the gospel side...”<sup>38</sup>

The tradition of Thomas in South India was not written until the Portuguese arrived. Schnabel notes, “The fact that the tradition of the Thomas Christians is not supported by written documents is not surprising: until the recent past none of the Indian people groups had a history that was documented by written sources. There are hardly any written historical documents for the first three thousand years of India history...In India, oral tradition is history.”<sup>39</sup> Schnabel equates oral traditions with written history concerning India. By accepting this position, the Thomas missionary enterprise in South India becomes clearer.

Leslie Brown has recorded many of the oral traditions concerning the Thomas Christians in English. First is the *Thomma Parvam* or Thoma’s Song. Brown writes:

It states that Thomas left Arabia and reached Malankara (not far from Cochin and Cranganore) in December A. D. 50. He made converts in Tiruvancikulam (Cranganore) from Jews who were living there as well as from natives of the place... Thomas then went east to the territory of the Cola kings, where at Mylapore he gave away money paid him by the king to build a palace, and was about to be killed by his angry client, when the king’s brother rose from the dead and described the splendid palace built by Thomas for the king in heaven... Thomas ended his days in Mylapore rather dramatically. He was ordered by Brahmans to worship Kali in a sacred grove, but refused, making the sign of the cross. The grove was immediately consumed by fire and the image of Kali removed, whereupon the enraged Brahmans stabbed Thomas with a spear so that he died on 3 July<sup>40</sup>

Two of the events in the tradition are difficult to accept. The first is event with the king. This event is nearly identical to the incident in *The Acts of Thomas*. The second act of Thomas describes the same incident occurring in the kingdom of Gondopharnes. Three explanations are possible. First, it is possible that Christians brought the event described in The Acts of Thomas to the Kerala state from the north. Second, the incident happened in the south and was mistakenly attributed to the time Thomas was in the north by the writer of *The Acts of Thomas*.

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid, 34.

<sup>39</sup>Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 888.

<sup>40</sup>Leslie Brown, *The Indian Christians of St Thomas: An Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malabar* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 49-50.

Third, the event never took place. Both the south and the north heard the story and repeated it in a way that would fit their context. The second event, which is difficult to believe, is the martyrdom of Thomas. The fact that Thomas would have been killed is not difficult to believe. All of the Apostles except John are believed to have been martyred for their faith. The difficulty with the second event is in the supernatural destruction of the sacred grove. The Syrian Church continues to celebrate July 3<sup>rd</sup> as the date of Thomas's death.

The second tradition is the *Margam Kali* song. Brown describes many events that are similar to the previous tradition. There appears to be three differences. First, Thomas needed a year to get his tools. Second, he travels to Malacca and China. Third, the sacred grove catches fire and one of the priests kills Thomas with a pointed stick. "The king took the body and buried it in Mylapore. According to this story Thomas died on 21 December 52."<sup>41</sup> This second tradition is not as difficult as the previous tradition. In the second tradition, the king's brother dies and sees the palace that Thomas has built for him in Heaven. The story share similarities with Gondopharnes's brother Gad dying in *The Acts of Thomas*. The sacred grove being on fire is not attributed supernaturally to Thomas. Thomas traveling to China and Malacca will not be discussed as it is outside the parameters of the paper.

Paul Thomas describes the impact of the Apostle Thomas on South India. "In Malabar the advent, labors and martyrdom of the Apostle constitute a living tradition, and the rich folklore, songs and dances of Malabar Christians describe in vivid detail the work of the Apostle in South India."<sup>42</sup> The focus of Indian writing is not on historical facts, but rather on philosophical and religious teachings. As previously stated, "In India, oral tradition is history."<sup>43</sup> The question remains, is it feasible for Thomas to have been in both regions of India?

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid, 51.

<sup>42</sup>Thomas, *Christians and Christianity in India*, 18.

<sup>43</sup>Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 888.

## The Unified Tradition

Travel from northwestern India to Southern India in the first century was not unusual. From the mouth of the Indus River, it would be possible to board a ship heading to Arabia. From Arabia, Thomas would have been able to board a ship heading East to Southern India. Brown writes that the Thoma's Song explains the latter portion of the trip. "It states that Thomas left Arabia and reached Malankara (not far from Cochin and Cranganore) in December A. D. 50."<sup>44</sup>

Schnabel clarifies:

The possibility that Thomas traveled from the kingdom of Gondophernes in northwestern India on the Indus River to Patala-Minnagar and Barbarikon in southern India is historically plausible, considering the well-documented trade relations between the Indus Delta and the Punjab in the first century A. D. We should note, however, that the Travancore tradition mentions Sokotra and Muziris as the first stations of Thomas's missionary journey. Sokotra is an island in the Gulf of Aden, a frequent stopover of the ships that plied the trade routes between India, southern Arabia and Roman Egypt.<sup>45</sup>

Even though it was physically possible to travel from the Indus River to southern India in the first century, did Thomas have enough time to complete what is claimed?

Neill suggests the period of the Gondophernes's reign was between A. D. 16 and 78.<sup>46</sup> Schnabel's dating of Gondophernes's reign is shorter than Neill's. He dates the reign between A. D. 20 and 46.<sup>47</sup> Neill does not offer a date for Thomas's arrival in either northern or southern India. Paul Thomas states, "According to traditions of Malabar he [Thomas] landed in Musiris in the year A. D. 52."<sup>48</sup> Keay agrees with Paul Thomas on the date of the landing of Thomas in South India.<sup>49</sup> C. P. Mathew and M. M. Thomas also agree with Paul Thomas and Keay.<sup>50</sup> No

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<sup>44</sup>Brown, *The Indian Christians of St Thomas*, 49.

<sup>45</sup>Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 889.

<sup>46</sup>Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, 28.

<sup>47</sup>Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 883.

<sup>48</sup>Thomas, *Christians and Christianity in India*, 12.

<sup>49</sup>Keay, *A History of the Syrian Church*, 1.

<sup>50</sup>C. P. Mathew and M. M. Thomas, *The Indian Churches of Saint Thomas* (Delhi: I. S. P. C. K., 1967),



date is suggested by any scholar for the beginning of Thomas's mission to northern India. Schnabel infers that the Apostles left Jerusalem around A. D. 41/42 with the death of James. Schnabel also has a date and reason for the end of the mission to northern India. "Gondophernes died around A. D. 55, and in A. D. 59 the Kushan from central Asia, under the leadership of Kujala Kadphises, conquered Taxila after having put pressure on the Punjab for some time."<sup>51</sup> Neill records the traditional length for Thomas's missionary activities in India as thirty years. "After this he itinerated in Malabar for thirty years; and, having gone again to preach the Gospel to the Pandi (Tamil) country, on the way as he went an Embran (Brahman) casting a dart smote him, and he was buried in the little mount of Mylapore."<sup>52</sup> One other date is necessary to mention. A. D. 72 is the date the majority of scholars attributed to Thomas's death. (Schnabel and Keay suggest A. D. 72)<sup>53</sup>. If this date is reconciled with the length of missionary activity that Neill records, Thomas arrived in India in A. D. 42. He spent approximately ten years in northwest India and then traveled via boat to southern India, landing in Cranganore in A. D. 52. After twenty years of missionary activity, establishing seven churches, Thomas was martyred in A. D. 72.

### **Alternative Explanations to the Thomas Traditions**

The easiest alternative explanation to the Thomas Traditions is that Thomas did not go to India. It begs the question, if Thomas did not go to India, where did he go? Parthia is often associated with Thomas. Luke records in Acts 2:9, "Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia." The first three groups mentioned by Luke are located in modern day Iran, with Parthia the furthest east. Jews from the Diaspora lived in Persia from the time of the Assyrian captivity in 712 B. C. Winkler explains,

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<sup>51</sup>Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 887.

<sup>52</sup>Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, 33.

<sup>53</sup>Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 889. Keay, *A History of the Syrian Church*, 1.

“Very probably, the first Christian congregations emerged in the Jewish communities of the Parthian empire, which, like the inhabitants of Osroene and the Roman province of Syria, were Aramaic-speaking.”<sup>54</sup> Origen believed that Thomas was a missionary to Parthia. See Figure A5 in Appendix 1 for a map of the Parthian Empire.

Second, the first church historian Eusebius claimed that Pantaenus went as the first missionary to India only to discover that there were Christians there.<sup>55</sup> The Christians claimed Bartholomew as their founder.<sup>56</sup> When Pantaenus returned to Alexandria, he mentions the Christian community in southern India and their founder, Bartholomew.

Third, there was a bishop from Edessa named Thomas who came to South India in 345 with a large party.<sup>57</sup> Bishop Thomas came with approximately 400 Christians when persecution arose. The Thomas Christians of southern India descended from Bishop Thomas and not the Apostle Thomas.

Fourth, from church history it is possible to deduce the following scenario. In the fourth century, every major city and every bishopric was attempting to establish a hierarchy for their city. By claiming one of the original disciples as planting a church or being martyred in your city was very important. The Bible is clear where Paul had been. The writings of John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, placed him in Asia Minor. The tradition was very strong that Peter was in Rome. George Smith explains, “The traditions of local Churches claim Peter or Thomas or Bartholomew as their apostolic founder. But apart from the natural desire of the early Christians thus to link their origin with the apostles, the traditions can all be accounted for as far

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<sup>54</sup>Baum and Winkler, *The Church of the East*, 8.

<sup>55</sup>Eusebius Pamphilus, "Church History," in *A Selected Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1890).

<sup>56</sup>Schnabel argues that Pantaenus heard “Bar Thoma” instead of the honored title of “Mar Thoma” and thus began the confusion of Bartholomew being in India.

<sup>57</sup>Charles H. Robinson, *History of Christian Missions* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 63-64.

as India is concerned, when we remember the vagueness with which the name India was used from Homer to Columbus, and even sometimes to the present day.”<sup>58</sup> Simply stated, the Christians in India wanted an Apostle and chose Thomas.

Fifth, *The Acts of Thomas* is a Gnostic work and must therefore be completely discounted. If *The Acts of Thomas* contains no truth, then the missionary work of Thomas in northwestern India did not occur. Protestants rightly reject *The Acts of Thomas* as a Gnostic work, but we overlook any historical value contained in the work.

Sixth, the date that *The Acts of Thomas* was written is well outside canonical Scripture. A. F. J. Klinj states, “It is generally assumed that the Acts of Thomas have to be dated to the beginning of the third century.”<sup>59</sup> The newest book in the New Testament was written by the end of the first century. *The Acts of Thomas* is between 130 and 160 years older than Revelation.

Seventh, *The Acts of Thomas* was not written by Thomas or by a traveling companion of Thomas. What is discounted is the oral tradition. As a culture, the West has relied on written information to verify the existence of people, places, and events. The closer to the actual events that the information was written the more accurate and reliable the source. Many cultures of the world today are still oral cultures. Their histories are passed down from generation to generation with exactness and detail. Songs are sung that relate an epic battle or other significant event.

Eighth, the two apparent competing traditions of Thomas in the North and the South of India pose a challenge. Eckhard Schnabel explains:

According to *Acts of Thomas*, the apostle Thomas engaged in missionary work in northwestern India (i.e., the region of modern Pakistan) at the royal court of “Gondophares.” The tradition of the Christians in southern India asserts that he engaged in missionary work in Travancore, and that later he traveled to the east coast of India at Malabar, where he was also able to win many people to faith in Jesus Christ before he died as a martyr, killed by a spear.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Smith, *The Conversion of India*, 11.

<sup>59</sup>Klinj, *The Acts of Thomas*, 15.

<sup>60</sup>Schnabel, *Early Christian Missions*, 881.

Is either of these two traditions correct? The Bible does not state what happened to any of the Apostles except for James. Luke records the event in Acts 12:2, “He (Herod) killed James the brother of John with the sword.” The ministries of Peter and Paul are given priority in Acts. Luke mentions Thomas one time in Acts 1:13, “And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James.” Speculation and tradition surround the deaths of the Apostles.

### **Counter-Arguments to the Alternative Explanations**

To counter the alternative explanations, it should be noted that there is a very long and strong tradition of the Apostle Thomas in at least south India. Mathew and Thomas trace the written tradition from A. D. 250 with *The Doctrine of the Apostles* written in Edessa to Marco Polo in 1292. First, “Again *The Doctrine of the Apostles* written in Edessa about A. D. 250 says that the Indian field of St Thomas was ‘even to the farthest sea.’ This clearly fits in with the West Coast and East Coast of South India, and not to any interior place in North India.”<sup>61</sup> Second, they present St John Chrysostom from the fifth century, who, along with his contemporaries Gregory of Nazianzus and Ambrose, claims, “Indians were first evangelized by an apostle.”<sup>62</sup> Third, they quote Gregory, Bishop of Tours, who wrote, “Thomas, the Apostle, according to the history of his passion, is declared to have suffered in India.”<sup>63</sup> Fourth, they cite a ninth century source, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which states, “And in the same year (884) Sighelm and Ethelstan conveyed to Rome the alms which the King (Alfred the Great) had vowed (to send), and also to India to St Thomas and St Bartholomew...”<sup>64</sup> Fifth, a Nestorian Bishop named Mar Solomon wrote in the thirteenth century, “Thomas was from Jerusalem of the tribe of

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<sup>61</sup>Mathew and Thomas, *The Indian Churches of Saint Thomas*, 12.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid, 10.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid, 9.

Juda (sic). He taught the Persians, Medes and Indians...”<sup>65</sup> Sixth, before Marco Polo traveled to India and China, there was a friar named Odoric who visited India a year before Marco Polo. Friar Odoric and Marco Polo have both attested to the claims of the South Indians that the Apostle Thomas was there.

Second, the northwest region of India bordered Parthia. Gondopharnes was a Parthian king. Neill notes, “Just at the time in which the New Testament was taking shape, there existed a powerful Parthian kingdom in north-west India and some lands adjacent to it.”<sup>66</sup> This kingdom would have been known as both a Parthian kingdom and an Indian kingdom. As previously stated, Origen attests to Thomas being in Parthia.

Third, by the time the bishop from Edessa named Thomas arrived in South India in 345, there was a long-standing tradition of Thomas Christians in the region. As previously stated, by A. D. 250 there was knowledge of the Apostle Thomas’s missionary activity in Edessa. The arrival of this group would have been significant. They were leaving Syria because of persecution. Pothan writes, “[T]his Church in India was reinforced by the first Syrian immigration in A. D. 345 consisting of 400 Christians from seventy-two families, belonging to seven tribes from Baghdad, Nineveh and Jerusalem under the merchant Knayi-Thomas (Thomas of Cana) of Baghdad.”<sup>67</sup> Christians would have remembered a large group of Christians coming from Syria for generations, especially since they were the first of their brethren to come to southern India.

Fourth, India is the only region to claim Thomas as their Apostle. Edessa claims a relationship with Thomas, but through his disciples Addai. Schnabel notes, “It is unique because no other Christian community traces its origins to the apostle Thomas.”<sup>68</sup> Bartholomew is also

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, 28.

<sup>67</sup>Pothan, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala*, 22.

<sup>68</sup>Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 891.

believed by Alexandrian Christians to have gone to India, but as previously stated, it is likely a misunderstanding of Mar Thoma. Neither region of India claims Bartholomew as their founding apostle. According to Smith, “This characteristic fact, however, we have, that he [Pantaenus] found among them the Hebrew or Aramaic Gospel of St Matthew, which formed the basis of our Greek evangel, said to have been taken to them by the apostle Bartholomew.”<sup>69</sup> The idea that Bartholomew was in India seems to originate with Pantaenus, not with the Indians.

Fifth, *The Acts of Thomas* contains many elements of truth. First, the name of the king has been proven by archeological evidence. Several coins have been found which have identified Gondopharnes as the king in *The Acts of Thomas*. He ruled in the Punjab region of India. E. J. Rapson has over two pages describing Gondopharnes in the Cambridge History of India.<sup>70</sup> The description of the region and the historicity of Gondopharnes demonstrate the historical foundation of *The Acts of Thomas*. Even though *The Acts of Thomas* is a Gnostic work, enough truth is contained in *The Acts of Thomas* to extrapolate the Apostle’s work in northwest India.

### **The Converts of the Apostle Thomas**

How did Thomas evangelize to people who did not speak the same language as he did? One possibility, the Holy Spirit continued to use the gift of tongues to enable Thomas to communicate the Gospel. Another possibility, Greek and Aramaic were spoken in the northwest region of India. Schnabel notes, “Clearly, the notion of an early Christian missionary who preached the gospel in India in Greek is historically possible.”<sup>71</sup> Aramaic was the trade language of the east. Greek was also a trade language. “The Apostle Thomas could have communicated with the population living in the cities of northwest and southwest India in Greek, and in North India also in Aramaic. The Mauryan king Asoka (273-236 B. C.) published several of his edicts

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<sup>69</sup>Smith, *The Conversion of India*, 14.

<sup>70</sup>E. J. Rapson, “The Scythian and Parthian Invaders”, 577-580.

<sup>71</sup>Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 885.

in a bilingual form, Greek and Aramaic.”<sup>72</sup> Gary Reger writes about Apollonios need of a translator. “Apollonios rarely needed a translator, but not because he understood silence. For a striking feature of his encounters with Indians and other non-Romans on his travels is the frequency with which he meets people who speak Greek.”<sup>73</sup> Three centuries before the birth of Christ, Alexander conquered the region. Greek-speakers ruled the kingdoms left behind.

In addition to the merchants, Thomas would have also found Jews living in both regions of India. Since the Punjab region of India was part of the Persian Empire, Jews are known to have settled throughout in the Persian Empire. Not all the Jews returned from exile when Cyrus issued his decree. Jews from Palestine also traveled to South India during the Jewish Wars in the first century. Pothan writes, “The arrival of a large party of Jews, who dreading the wrath of the conquerors after the destruction of the second temple of Jerusalem in A. D. 69 fled to India and established a colony at Cranganur where they lived for 1,000 years before moving to Cochin where they now live.”<sup>74</sup> Pothan also suggests that this group of Jews was not the first to come to India. “We are told in the Bible that King Solomon’s ships (1000 B. C.) traded under his Phoenician seamen. ‘And they came to Ophir and fetched from thence gold, four hundred and twenty talents, and brought it to King Solomon.’”<sup>75</sup> Pothan identifies Ophir as “a very ancient site on the west coast of India, thirty-six miles north of Bombay, and three miles north of Bassein called by the name of Nalla Sopara on the suburban section of the Western Railway.”<sup>76</sup> While Jews had knowledge of India, apparently they did not have any communities in South Asia until the arrival AD 69.

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid, 895.

<sup>73</sup>Gary Reger, "On the Road to India with Apollonios of Tyana and Thomas the Apostle," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 22 (December 2007): 262.

<sup>74</sup>Pothan, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala*, 8.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid, 6. 1 Kings 9:28.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid, 7.

The groups of people that Thomas evangelized represent a cross-section of Indian society. Leslie Brown writes, “St Thomas won over seventeen thousand souls because of the supernatural virtue which shone in him. An exact account is given of his converts: 6850 Brahmans, 2590 Kshatriyas, 3780 Vaisyas, and 4280 Sudras. Two kings were converted and became metropolitans...”<sup>77</sup> Robert Frykenberg has similar numbers, “6,850 Brahmans, 2,800 Kshatriyas, 3,750 Vaishiyas, and 4,250 Shudras—the whole coming to more than 17,480 souls.”<sup>78</sup> The Brahmans are the priestly caste of Hindu society and the highest level of Hindu society. The Kshatriyas are the ruling caste and the second highest level of Hindu society. The Vaisyas are the business class and the third level of Hindu society. The Sudras are the artisan and laborers and are the fourth level of Hindu. Brown’s account does not include any non-Hindus that would have converted. With a large group of merchants coming and going, Thomas would have had a rotating group to evangelize. Frykenberg states, “Significantly, no mention is made of what ‘others’ (i.e. aboriginals or untouchables...) might also have become part of this Christian community. Such groups, in terms of texts already outlining Brahmanical views of the social structure, would not have been worth counting.”<sup>79</sup> Rowena Robinson notes the differences in who the Thomas Christians reached and who the Europeans were able to reach. She writes, “The Syrian Christians [Thomas Christians] are far from constituting a low-status group, which owes its origin to European missionaries or is reliant on the colonial state. Rather, they have a long history of prestige and privilege...”<sup>80</sup> The highest castes of India, those closest to ending the Hindu cycle of rebirth, would follow Christ. What was it about Thomas’s message or lifestyle that would cause a highborn Hindu to follow Jesus?

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<sup>77</sup>Brown, *The Indian Christians of St Thomas*, 50.

<sup>78</sup>Robert E. Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginning to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 100.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid.

<sup>80</sup>Robinson, *Christians of India*, 40.



## **The Legacy of Thomas**

Thomas left behind a thriving church on the edge of a major trade route. For over 1,900 years, Kerala Christians have celebrated the death of Thomas. Even today, south India is one of the highest Christian areas of India.<sup>81</sup> While many Thomas Christians are Catholic or Syrian Christians, the number of Evangelicals is growing. The Thomas Christians of India were known in both the Eastern and Western Church before the Muslims closed communication between the two regions. When the Portuguese arrived in India in 1498, Vasco da Gama searched for the tomb of the Apostle Thomas.

### **Early Contact with the Western Church**

Pothan states, “In the first and second centuries of the Christian era there was considerable intercourse between Alexandria and India.”<sup>82</sup> One of the earliest contacts between the Christians of South India and Christianity in the Mediterranean region was around AD 190.

Keay relates the story:

In the second century A. D. Demetrius was bishop of Alexandria. It is said that he received a message from people in India asking him to send to them teachers to instruct them in the faith of Christ. At that time the Catechetical School of Alexandria was presided over by Pantaenus... When this message was received he offered to go to India. This was in the year 189. He is said to have found in India a Gospel of St Matthew in Hebrew, which St Bartholomew was supposed to have taken there. Pantaenus brought this back to Alexandria.<sup>83</sup>

The first church historian, Eusebius writes about Pantaenus, “They say that he displayed such zeal for the divine Word, that he was appointed as a herald of the Gospel of Christ to the nations in the East, and was sent as far as India.”<sup>84</sup> Eusebius does not give a specific date for

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<sup>81</sup>See Figure A6 in Appendix 1 for a map of Christians in India. Only the northeastern part of India is more Christian than south India.

<sup>82</sup>Pothan, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala*, 16.

<sup>83</sup>Keay, *A History of the Syrian Church in India*, 16.

<sup>84</sup>Eusebius Pamphilus, *Church History in A Selected Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. and trans. Philip Schaff, trans. (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1890) [on-line]; accessed 23 November 2010. Available from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.x.xi.html>; Internet.

Pantaenus's journey to India. Second, as previously mentioned, it is possible that Pantaenus misunderstood "Mar Thoma" and thought he heard "Bartholomew". Indian Christians naturally looked to Alexandria for leadership because of the trade route between India and Egypt. In addition, Eugene Tisserant has an alternative suggestion to the Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew. He writes, "The word 'Hebrew' is probably the result of a scholarly adaptation of Eusebius. Actually that Gospel must have been written in Aramaic, in Syriac."<sup>85</sup> The liturgy of the Indian church was in Syriac.

The next Christian to visit India was "Dudi, or David, a bishop of Basra on the Persian Gulf who was famous for his learning, left his own see and went to India, where he brought the Gospel to many people. This is the first bishop of 'India' mentioned by history."<sup>86</sup> Keay dates the visit between A. D. 295 and 300. Uncertainty exists about the location and if any Christians were in the area he visited. Neill speculates:

Before the end of the third century the Parthians and the Arabs emerged on the Red Sea; travel became dangerous, and communication between Egypt and India was much reduced. If a bishop from the Persian Gulf visited Indian communities *in the Indus region*, the fact would not be so remarkable as to deserve special mention in a chronicle. But if the Persian churches, learning of the destitution of the churches *in South India*, decided to send an emissary to their help, this would indeed indicate a new departure, which could have great significance for the future, and which therefore might be thought worthy of record.<sup>87</sup>

The contact with Christians in South India would be significant given the fact that a sea voyage would have been necessary. If contact with Egypt was no longer possible, then a Christian merchant traveling in Persia could have mentioned the plight of his brethren in India. The relationship between India and Persia is a significant relationship in for the Thomas Christians. Edessa claims to be the final resting place of the Apostle Thomas's remains. Paul Thomas writes, "An Eastern tradition, while supporting the Indian belief of the martyrdom and burial of

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<sup>85</sup>Eugene Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity in India: A History of the Syro-Malabar Church from the Earliest time to the Present Day*, trans. E. R. Hambye (New York: Longmans, Green & Co LTD, 1957), 6-7.

<sup>86</sup>Keay, *A History of the Syrian Church in India*, 18.

<sup>87</sup>Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, 41.

the Apostle in Mylapore, mentions that the body was transferred from its original resting place to Edessa (Urfah) on the Euphrates valley, then an important center of Eastern Christianity.”<sup>88</sup>

At the Council of Nicaea in 325, one of the bishops present claimed to be “Metropolitan of Persia and Great India.”<sup>89</sup> James Ogilvie offers more detail on the bishop. “Of Bishop John and his diocese nothing more is known than these words [John, Metropolitan of Persia and Great India] tell, but presumably Persia was his headquarters, and some part of India had for him at least a nominal interest.”<sup>90</sup> The northwest part of India would be the logical area of India since it is next to Persia, but also southern India as previously mentioned by Neill.

The next significant event happened in A. D. 345. The arrival of Thomas of Cana (or Thomas of Jerusalem depending on the source) with four hundred Christians was a boost to the Christian community of South India. Richter writes, “They were welcomed with great rejoicings by the Christians of the country, and endowed with important privileges by the rulers of the land, so that their arrival was the beginning of a flourishing epoch in the history of the Malabar Church.”<sup>91</sup> As previously stated, the immigrants were fleeing persecution in Persia. As the ties between India and Persia grew in the third and fourth centuries, theoretically, knowledge of Christians in India would have grown too. It makes sense for Christians fleeing persecution to go where there was no persecution. The Roman Empire would not have been a good choice because there were still pockets of persecution. India, however, welcomed Christians to settle the coast and work as merchants.

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<sup>88</sup>Thomas, *Christians and Christianity in India*, 21.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

<sup>90</sup>James N Ogilvie, *The Apostles of India: The Baird Lecture for 1915* (New York: Hodder and stoughton, 1915), 49.

<sup>91</sup>Richter, *A History of Missions in India*, 30.

## Loss of Communication with the West

The rise of Islam in the seventh century would sever the lines of communication between India and Western Christianity. Robert Frykenberg writes, “Muslim expansion (632-42) effectively cut off the East from Byzantium and the West, doing so more effectively than any previous event.”<sup>92</sup> Additionally, the animosity between Roman Christendom and Eastern Christianity made communication polemic. Rome labeled anyone in the Syrian sphere of influence as “Nestorian.” Because of the negative view of Eastern Christianity and the rise of Muslim power, “a drastic and diminishing communication thereafter closed off occasions for theological or ecclesiastical conciliation between East and West.”<sup>93</sup> Effective communication between India and the West would not be re-established until the Portuguese arrived in 1498. Christianity continued in India under its own leadership. Occasionally, a bishop would be sent from Edessa or Persia.

As the isolation grew because of Muslim control over the seas and land, the Thomas Christians became less particular of their bishops. Paul Thomas articulates their plight:

Of the geography of Western Asia they knew little; of the theological niceties that rocked that ancient center of Christianity perhaps less. What they apparently wanted was a Bishop of Western Asian appearance who did not understand their language Malayalam, and as long as a person of this description came to them by sea they were not interested in his doctrines of his *bona fides*. In fact the Malabar Christians were at times reduced to such desperate straits in the matter of obtaining foreign Bishops that any pirate who managed to capture a Syrian or Persian of respectable appearance with a flowing beard was in a position to palm him off to Malabar Christians as a Bishop at a very good price.<sup>94</sup>

As the contact with the West lessened, the Thomas Christians still maintained their faith in Christ. They had their own priests and archdeacons. Paul Thomas explains, “Through Syrian contact a system of Church government was evolved in which Bishops were to be of foreign extraction especially from the then well-known centers of Christianity in Western Asia but internal administration was carried on by the Archdeacons. Pending the arrival of Bishops, the

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<sup>92</sup>Frykenberg, *Christianity in India*, 105.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid.

<sup>94</sup>Thomas, *Christians and Christianity in India*, 40-41.

Archdeacons were the virtual rulers of the community.”<sup>95</sup> When the Portuguese arrived, they did not find a group of struggling Christians. The Portuguese found a thriving community.

Frykenberg states, “Native Christians in India were seen as holding positions of prominence in some sixty towns and villages along the shorelines and their adjacent uplands, living in territories ruled by some twenty rajas and a multitude of petty warlords.”<sup>96</sup>

### **Learning from Thomas Christians**

The privileges granted to Christians in Kerala are related to their status as “foreigners”. Penelope Carson notes, “Brahmanical prejudices against trade and navigation made them happy to leave this to foreigners. Commercial interests fostered a spirit of tolerance, including tolerance for people with other forms of religious practice, together with their communities.”<sup>97</sup> Carson continues to describe the various ways the local rulers used the Syrian Christians. Of primary importance was their value in the military. She asserts, “It was their military prowess that won them a central place in service to many local rajas.”<sup>98</sup> Because of their value, the Christians were granted privileges that equated them with the high caste Brahman. Carson explains, “The ruler of Venad (Travancore) gave Christians seventy-two rights and privileges usually granted only to high dignitaries, including exemption from import duties, sales tax, and the slave tax...Kerala’s rulers endowed and protected Christian churches in the same way as they endowed and protected Hindu temples.”<sup>99</sup> Indian leaders were granting them

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<sup>95</sup>Ibid, 39.

<sup>96</sup> Robert E. Frykenberg, "Christians in India," in *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500*, ed. Robert E. Frykenberg (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 41.

<sup>97</sup>Penelope Carson, "Christianity, Colonialism, and Hinduism in Kerala," in *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500*, ed. Robert E. Frykenberg (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 132.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid.

protection and privileges while in other areas of the world Christians were being persecuted for their faith.

The Thomas Christians of South India present a fascinating subject for how to plant and sustain an indigenous church in India. Modern attempts in India focus on reaching as many people with the gospel as possible. Usually those who respond to the gospel are from the lower caste or the Dalits.<sup>100</sup> The high caste Indians will not worship with the lower caste Indians because of pollution issues. Thomas Christians reached the highest castes and were on the same level as the rulers. Part of what the Thomas Christians did was to adapt to the culture. The parts of the culture that were not contrary to Scripture were adopted. In some cases, the leaders of the Syrian churches adapted more than what a modern missionary would. For example, Carson notes, “In some areas, ties between Hindu Nayers and Syrian Christians were reciprocal, each taking part and having roles at both Hindu and Christian festivals.”<sup>101</sup> Most Evangelicals would not take a leading role in celebrating another religion’s festivals.

The Thomas Christians are not viewed as outsiders to the local Hindus. Frykenberg writes, “Thomas Christians continued to represent the earliest and strongest expressions of indigenous Christianity to be found anywhere in the continent. Both in ideological and in institutional forms, these Christians gradually became separated by historical circumstances into more and more distinct communities, all of which continue to thrive.”<sup>102</sup> The questions for Evangelical missions are, “Do we attempt to reform the Thomas Christians, or do we view them as heretics in need of the gospel?” Siga Arles argues for unity in missions, “Missiology’s vision should be large, not settling for the narrow goal of expanding a denomination, but aiming high to infiltrate and shape the entire Indian community with the salt, light, leaven, and wisdom of the eternal Gospel, truly reflecting Jesus Christ, the living Head of the church.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup>Dalits are also known as the Untouchables. Technically, Dalits are outside of the caste system.

<sup>101</sup>Carson, “Christianity, Colonialism, and Hinduism in Kerala,” 133.

<sup>102</sup>Frykenberg, *Christianity in India*, 115.

The Apostle Thomas presents an interesting study in how to effectively present the gospel in a pluralistic society. Paul Thomas notes two reasons for Thomas's success.

The personality of the Apostle and his exemplary life must have been in no small measure responsible for his success. Thomas was...a zealot as is evident from the Gospel account of his eagerness to go and die with the Master when the other disciples wavered...The Apostle's success [was not] his polemic ability but to his saintly life and the miracles he performed.<sup>104</sup>

Thomas's success related to an unwavering commitment to Christ and a holy life. His high moral standard made an impact on the high caste Hindus he met.

### **Conclusion**

The evidence seems to point to the plausibility of the Apostle Thomas going to northern and southern India. Based on the research presented above, the following scenario is proposed. When Herod Agrippa in AD 41/42 killed James the son of Zebedee and the brother of the Apostle John, the remaining Apostles left Jerusalem and began to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. Thomas seems to head east toward India. The accounts of him being the Apostle to the Parthians are reasonable. Gondopharnes was an Indo-Parthian ruler. The possibility of Thomas an Apostle to Parthia is reasonable. He was in Gondopharnes's kingdom for ten years. He traveled throughout the kingdom as attested in *The Acts of Thomas*. Vigorous trade between India and the Roman Empire existed and Thomas would have found Aramaic and Greek speaking people wherever he went. When northwest India was invaded, Thomas caught a ship heading to Arabia and then to Malabar. Thomas spent the rest of his life preaching a crucified Christ, winning thousands for the Kingdom of God in southern India. He was martyred around AD 72 in Mylapore.

The Apostle's legacy lives to this very day in the group of Christians in India known as the Thomas Christians. The Thomas Christians may consider themselves Syrian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Reformed, or Protestant, but they all trace their spiritual birth to the Apostle

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<sup>103</sup> Siga Arles, "The State of Mission Studies in India: An Overview and Assessment of Publications and Publishing," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34 (July 2010): 162.

<sup>104</sup> Thomas, *Christians and Christianity in India*, 13-14.

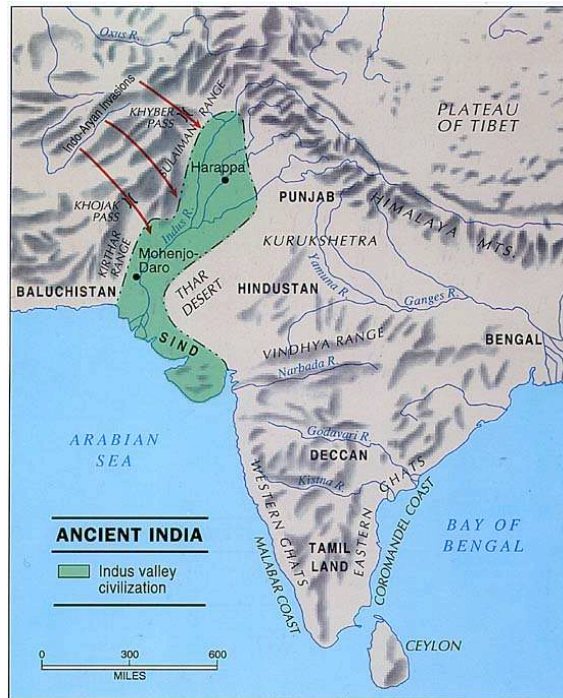
Thomas. Only the Lord knows for certain whether Thomas went to India. To the Thomas Christians of India, he will always be the Apostle to India.



# APPENDIX 1

## Maps

### Figure A1



Ancient India  
© 2000 by Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers Inc.

T-25

Figure A2



Figure A3

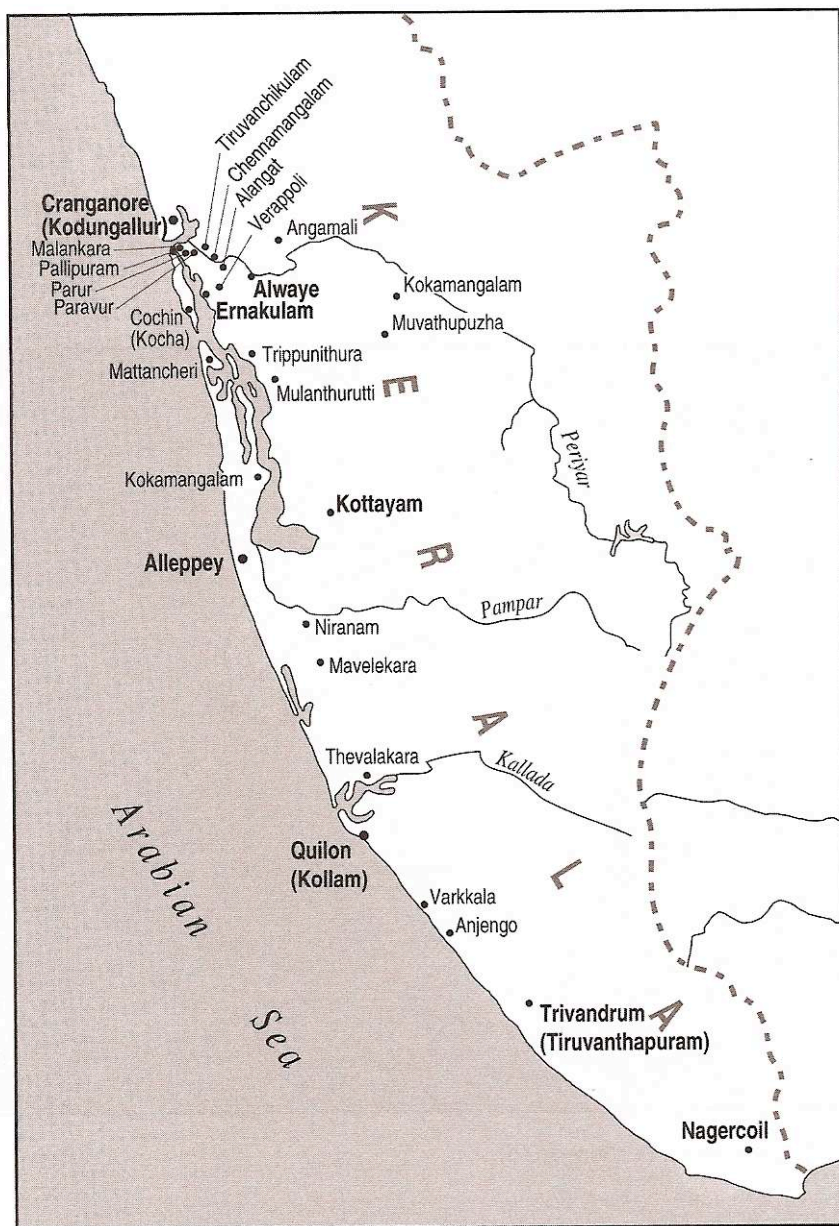


Figure A4



Mylapore is located near Chennai, Tamil Nadu



Figure A5

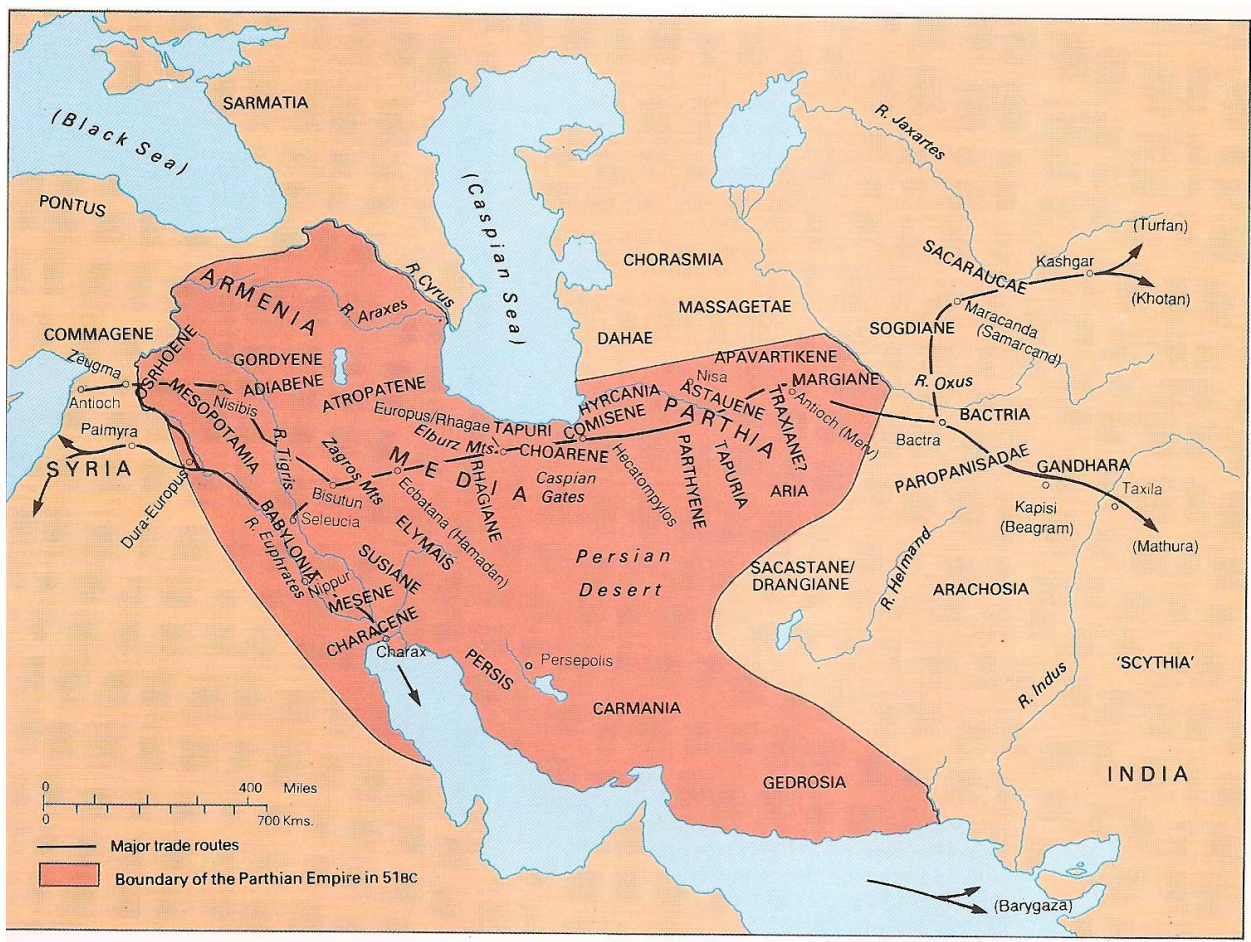
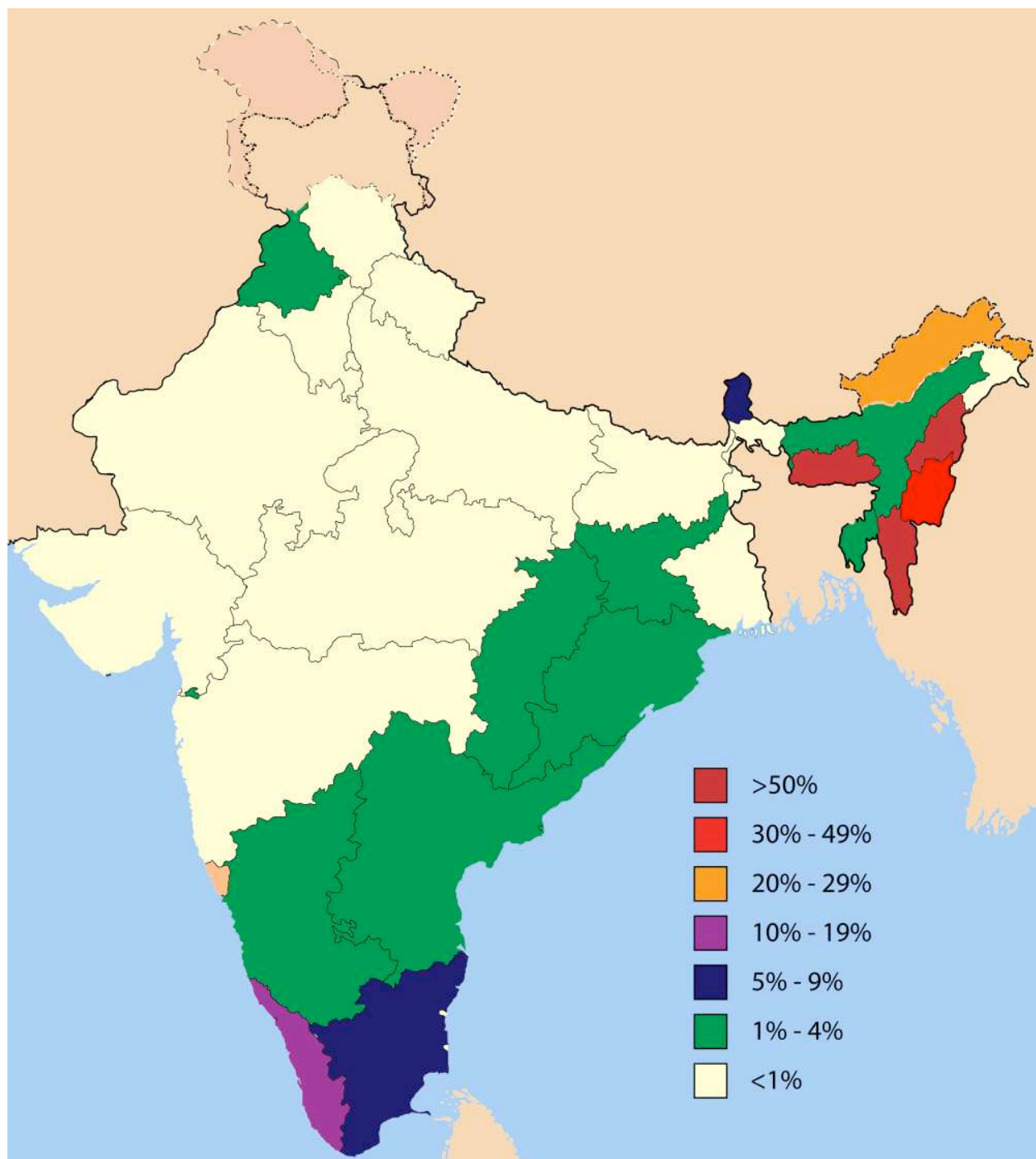


Figure A6



## **APPENDIX 2**

### **Alternative Spellings**

Gondopharnes – Gondophares, Gondophernes, Gundaphares

Kerala – Malabar

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