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ISHWAR SHARAN

**THE
MYTH OF SAINT THOMAS
AND THE
MYLAPORE SHIVA TEMPLE**

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**VOICE OF INDIA
NEW DELHI**

**The Myth of Saint Thomas and the Mylapore Shiva Temple
Saint Thomas and Caste
Hideaway Communalism in the Indian Express?
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Introduction

THE MYTH OF ST. THOMAS is the prototype of the Jesus-in-India stories that began to appear in the last century to explain the early years of Jesus that are not accounted for in the New Testament. They were invented by Western spiritualists who also paraded as historians of the arcane, and they have become a favourite tale of today's spiritual seeker and the convent-educated Hindu who is flattered to learn that the founder of Christianity may have visited India.

The devotees of these stories do not notice that in them neither Judas Thomas nor his twin brother Jesus are presented as seekers of truth or admirers of Hindu religion and culture. Instead they are presented as teachers of their own superior truth or as enlightened social reformers who are persecuted by pagan priests. Whether the tales are set in Palur or Mylapore as is the case of Thomas, or Puri and Benares as is the case of Jesus, the theme of martyrdom is the same. The "superior" teachings of both men are rejected and their lives threatened by "reactionary" caste Hindus. Thomas is murdered on a hilltop near Madras and Jesus is stoned and driven from the country by a mob – only to return and marry a princess of Kashmir after surviving the Crucifixion.

The first objective of these tales is to vilify Brahmins and malign the Hindu religion and community. The second objective – and here we part company with the Jesus stories – is to present Christianity as a native Indian religion, not a Western import, and show that Syrian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism can rightfully claim religious hegemony in India.

The Syrian Church does not press the issue but the Roman Catholic Church, still harbouring illusions of world power, does claim India as part of her apostolic patrimony on the grounds that the apostle may have died here. The disclaimer "may" must be noted for the Church does not officially pronounce that St. Thomas came to India. Yet this does not stop her from promoting the tale in quasi-official

fashion in misleading pilgrim guidebooks like the Rt. Rev. Herman D'Souza's *In the Steps of St. Thomas*.

The third reason for the legend's existence is to help the community-conscious Syrian Christians maintain their caste identity. They claim to be Brahmins, the descendants of Namboodiris converted by Thomas in the first century C.E. – though there were no Christians in India before the fourth century and when they did arrive and settle in Kerala, they would obtain a social position similar to that of Nairs.

The legend was invented to give these Syrian immigrants Indian ancestry and the patronage of a local martyr-saint – Christianity is the religion of martyrs¹ – and it was resurrected and embellished in the sixteenth century by Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries who needed a pious story of persecution to cover up their own persecution of the Hindus. This is another reason for the Church to promote the tale in Madras, for during that period she and her imperial Portuguese "secular arm" destroyed many temples including the Shiva temple on the Mylapore beach, the Murugan temple on Little Mount and the Vishnu temple on Big Mount.

The Archaeological Survey of India has never investigated the origins of early Christian churches in India in the same way that it has studied old mosques and other Muslim monuments, but this work has been done by German scholars and awaits translation and publication in English. It shows that almost all sixteenth and seventeenth century churches in India contain temple rubble and are built on

1. Gore Vidal, in *Julian*, describes the vicious attacks made on Emperor Julian by Christian bishops because he refused to persecute them. He had rejected Christianity as a false religion and returned to Roman Paganism, but continued to treat Christians with tolerance, debated with them, and made them pay reparations for the many temples they had destroyed in the Roman Empire. He was assassinated by a trusted Christian officer while on campaign against the Persians.

temple sites.² The destruction of one of these temples, the first Kapaleeswara temple on the Mylapore beach, is reviewed here because of its inexorable link with the myth of St. Thomas.

And lastly, it must be noted that the myth of St. Thomas in India remains alive in India because the Government of India, the national media, and our intellectuals continue to present it to Indians as Indian history. The Department of Posts issued a stamp in 1972 commemorating the nineteenth centenary of the martyrdom of St. Thomas. And Rajendra Prasad's 1955 St. Thomas Day speech is still quoted by Christians and Hindus alike as proof that St. Thomas did in fact come to India. Nobody stops to consider that not only was Rajendra Prasad not an authority on St. Thomas, but he, like Jawaharlal Nehru, was a very poor student of Indian history.

This essay and Swami Tapasyananda's article – both of which sat on the *Indian Express* editor's desk for months before being rejected – are only the beginning of a comprehensive study of Didymus Judas Thomas that will have to be made. All the evidence is not in, and even as this book goes to press a friend sends another reference that I have missed. This one is from Arnold Toynbee who, in *A Study of History*, observes, "Though the Saint's mission and death in India are

2. The hundreds of temples and thousands of idols destroyed by the Portuguese in Goa has been documented by A.K. Priolkar in *The Goa Inquisition*. And the Christian historian T.R. de Souza, quoted by M.D. David in *Western Colonialism in Asia and Christianity*, writes, "At least from 1540 onwards and in the island of Goa before that year, all Hindu idols had been annihilated or had disappeared, all the temples had been destroyed and their sites and building material were in most cases utilized to erect new Christian churches and chapels."

The British in the Madras Presidency were generally less destructive, but among other offences they deliberately fired on the temples of Kalahasti, partly demolished the Tirumalai Nayak Mahal at Madurai and obliterated the temples in Fort St. George at Madras. This fort contains the first Protestant Church built in the Far East.

probably legendary, his reputed burial place was a centre of pilgrimage for Indian Christians."

This reputed burial place of St. Thomas must now become a centre of pilgrimage for archaeologists, historians and philosophers who do not have a theological axe to grind like the pilgrims of old and the priests of today, but who would know the plain truth about old Mylapore and record it for our children.

Madras

1 December 1990

Ishwar Sharan

THE ACTS OF THOMAS is a third century apocryphal book originally written in Syriac or Greek and sometimes included in Roman Catholic bibles.¹ It describes the travels, works, and martyrdom of Didymus Judas Thomas, apostle and twin brother of Jesus – as the Greek "Didymus" and Aramaic "Thomas" sobriquets imply – in lengthy, theatrical, and often unsatisfying "medieval" verses.

The apostle, these *Acts* record, arrives at Andrapolis, a royal city in India, with Abbanes, the slave-trader to whom Jesus had sold him sometime after the Resurrection.

It is 52 C.E., and Judas Thomas and Abbanes have come by ship to this city from Jerusalem. They disembark and attend a wedding banquet, where the apostle curses a rude serving boy that he be torn to pieces by a lion. This happens, and it is recorded as the first pious act of Judas Thomas in India.

Thomas then meets King Gundaphoras, takes his gold and silver, and builds him a wonderful palace in heaven. The king is converted to Christianity, but only after his

1. The traditional dates and authors of all New Testament books, canonical or apocryphal, are conjectural as there is no extant early manuscript versions predating the fourth century C.E. (Common Era). Emperor Diocletian destroyed all Christian writings in 303 C.E., and in 326 C.E., a year after the Council of Nicea raised Jesus from mortal prophet to immortal God by an ecclesiastical vote of 218 for, 2 against, Emperor Constantine sanctioned the confiscation and destruction of all works that challenged "orthodox" Christian teaching. Five years later Constantine commissioned and financed new copies of the Bible, and as there were no longer any original documents to work from, the bishops, intent on promoting the Pauline salvation cult in their own interest, were free to revise, edit and rewrite the existing materials in accordance with their own tenets. Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln, in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, show that the Bible, and accepted Christian tradition, is an arbitrary collection of borrowed and often fabulous tales, the historical truth of which has never been established by the best biblical scholars.

Bardesenes. But whoever the real author was, I think the details of this work are not only consistent with the belief that they were put together by a member of the Edessene Church, but also defy explanation on any other hypothesis."

M. Augustus Neander, in *General History of the Christian Religion and Church*, says, "The writings of the so-called apostolic fathers have unhappily for the most part come down to us in a condition very little worthy of confidence. At a very early date spurious writings were planned in the names of these men so highly venerated in the church for the purpose of giving authority to particular opinions or principles."

Yet this ream of pious invention is the primary source of early Christian history in India. It has been much embroidered and radically changed by the Malabar Syrian Christians – "St. Thomas" Christians – who maintain as an article of faith that their ancestors were converted to Christianity in India by the apostle Thomas himself.

This tradition could be partly true and their ancestors may indeed have been evangelized by Judas Thomas, but this took place in Mesopotamia and Persia, or Parthia, not India.

THE FIRST CHRISTIANS to arrive in India, landing at Cranganore, Kerala, came in 345 C.E. They were four hundred refugees belonging to seven tribes and seventy-two families of West Asia, who were fleeing religious persecution by the Persian Sapor II. He had driven the Christians out of his domains because he considered them

a state liability when Rome, Persia's arch enemy, began to Christianize.²

Even K.S. Latourette, in *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, does not allow the possibility of Christians coming to India by any route before the third century.

The migration of Christians from Baghdad, Nineveh and Fars into the subcontinent, in the fourth century and later, is attested to by copperplate inscriptions in Pahlavi recording grants to the newcomers from generous Hindu kings.

Rev. C.E. Abraham, in an article in *The Cultural Heritage of India IV*, notes that, "Their leader is generally known among Malabar Christians as Knae Thomman – Thomas Cananaus (or more often 'of Cana') – that is, Thomas the Merchant."

And, "The Persian crosses – or 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 of Persia.

These black stone bas-relief crosses, the one at St. Thomas Mount over-inscribed in "Malavar", are dated to the eighth century and associated with another major migration of Christians in that century into Malabar from Persia.

Cosmas the Alexandrian, a Nestorian, in 522 C.E., is the first traveller to report seeing churches in India: one in Quilon, Kerala, and the other in Ceylon.

With the arrival of Vasco da Gama in the fifteenth century and the first Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier in

2. Contrary to Christian tradition, the Sun Emperor Constantine was not a convert to Christianity. He patronized the obscure cult for political reasons and became its true saviour when he called the Council of Nicea in 325 C.E. By favouring the bishop of Rome over other bishops, he paved the way for this ecclesiastic and his ambitious successors to take over the Christian Church and, eventually, the Roman Empire itself.

the sixteenth, Christianity became a violent and destructive political force in India. The Portuguese, building on Syrian Christian traditions and the *Acts of Thomas*, added to and reworked the already pregnant St. Thomas myth to serve the Papal interest and their own. Their story, with its many embellishments, continues to change and grow with the political needs of the Church. C.A. Simon, in "In Memory of a Slain Saint" published in the *Indian Express* of Madras dated 30 December 1989, writes, among other things, that, "The oppressed and the downtrodden followed (Thomas) and claimed equal status in society as it was denied them by the prevailing social norms. He condemned untouchability and attempted to restore equal status for women."

Aside from the fact that Judas Thomas never came to India and was not interested in the poor or the prevailing social norms, which the Syrian Christians adopted as did the Roman Catholics later – Pope Gregory XV (1621-1623) issued a bull sanctioning caste divisions in Indian churches – a study of the repressive ideology of the *Acts of Thomas* and earlier *Gospel of Thomas*,³ and even the few references to Thomas in the New Testament, show that

3. The second century Coptic *Gospel*, discovered in Egypt in 1946, contains sayings of Jesus recorded by Didymus Judas Thomas. These include:

16. Jesus said: Perhaps men think that I came to cast peace on the world; and they do not know that I came to cast division upon the earth, fire, sword, war. For five will be in a house; there will be three against two and two against three, the father against the son and the son against the father. And they will stand because they are single ones.

42. Jesus said: He who has (something) in his hand, to him it will be given; and he who has nothing, from him even the little he has will be taken away.

112. Simon Peter said to them: Let Mariham go away from us. For women are not worthy of life. Jesus said: Lo, I will draw her so that I will make her a man so that she too may become a living spirit which is like you men; for every woman who makes herself a man will enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Simon's statements are pure invention. Yet these falsehoods and the legend itself are taught as authentic Indian history in South Indian classrooms and presented as fact in respected journals and authorized guidebooks.

The story of St. Thomas in India which follows is more or less the one current today among Indians. It is based on the alleged but non-existent *St. Thomas Biography* of 73 C.E., which is said to be summarized in the later *St. Thomas Song* of 1601, itself non-existent until 1893, for these are the fabulous "ancient" authority that cannot be ignored. No apology is made for this rendition – a meagre bit of martyr's bone – or for commentary.

"Our" Thomas, apostle of Jesus, who doubted his brother and lord, arrives at Cranganore in 52 C.E., with Habban the trader on whose ship he took passage across the Arabian Sea. In Malabar he preaches the Christian gospel, first to the Jews and then to the heathens, performs the standard miracles of a holy man who must prove himself, and by them converts the Brahmins of Palur who become the priests of his new Church – though to this day nobody believes it. He also converts a lone barber, but this poor soul remains an outcaste even within the apostle's community.

Thomas builds seven and a half churches in Malabar, and then crosses over to Mylapore without baptizing a single pagan along the way. From here he takes passage for China.

But Judas Thomas soon returns to Cranganore at the behest of the son-in-law of the Raja of Tiruvanchikulam, then again crosses to Mylapore where he settles down to a life of teaching and prayer, builds a house on the beach by a yogi's temple out of a great miraculous log from the sea, and works wonders among the people – wonders, curiously, already worked by Shri Krishna and recorded in the Jagannath temple records at Puri.

These marvels undermine the authority of the Brahmins of Mylapore and in jealous rage they decide to kill him. An assassin is hired, and Thomas is speared to death on a hill south of Madras now called St. Thomas Mount.⁴ He dies, wearing as scapular an icon of the Virgin painted by his co-apostle Luke – whose prolificity in art is indeed miraculous, for his paintings are found everywhere in the world – and praying before a stone cross he had carved himself.

The body of the apostle is returned to Mylapore, wrapped in cloth-of-gold offered by a generous local raja, and buried in his little house on the beach. It is 72 C.E., and Judas Thomas will be forgotten until the sixteenth century when the Portuguese decide to discover his bones. Then they will find three skeletons: one black, one white, and one "much worn out."

This is the tale of Thomas in India which now passes for history, as the Syrian "St. Thomas" Christians and Roman Catholic Church intended it should. Vincent A. Smith, in *The Oxford History of India*, says about it and the "India"-Parthia account, "Both stories obviously cannot be true; even an apostle can die but once." Smith favours the colourful Mylapore martyrdom, then adds, "But it is by no means certain that St. Thomas was martyred at all. An early writer, Heracleon the Gnostic, asserts that he ended his days in peace."

4. This hill is crowned with a Roman Catholic church built around 1547 on the ruins of a Vishnu temple destroyed by the Portuguese. It contains the undated bright wooden icon of the Virgin by "St. Luke", the famous eighth century Persian "bleeding cross" by "St. Thomas" – which, according to tradition, he embraced when he died – and two paintings of Thomas and his lance-bearing Hindu assassin who was "suborned by King Mahadeva's priest and ministers". The old painting fixed on the reredos depicts an orthodox Brahmin as the assassin, but a new cartoon hung on the wall portrays an unidentified Hindu as the murderer.

L. de la Vallee Poussin, A. Harnack and Richard Garbe do not give the *Acts of Thomas* any credibility at all. Other scholars maintain there never was an apostle named Thomas, while those who do accept that he lived say that he and other early Christian missionaries did not travel beyond Ethiopia and Arabia Felix – two countries, like Persia and Parthia, that were often called India by ancient geographers.

Edward Gibbon accepted the existence of Thomas and wanted to know if he was an apostle, a Manichean, or an Armenian merchant. Henry Love, in *Vestiges of Old Madras*, raised the same question then refused to speculate on the answer. He writes, "Whether the founder of this church was the Apostle, or Thomas the Manichean who lived in the third century, or whether the Christians named themselves after Thomas the Armenian . . . is a debatable matter which need not be discussed."

A.D. Burnell, in an article in the *Indian Antiquary* of May 1875, writes, "The attribution of the origin of South Indian Christianity to the apostle Thomas seems very attractive to those who hold certain theological opinion. But the real question is, on what evidence does it rest? Without real and sufficient evidence so improbable a circumstance is to be at once rejected. Pious fictions have no value in historical research."

As we have seen, the first Christians to arrive in India, in 345 C.E., identified Thomas of Cana as their leader. T.R. Vedantham, in the "St. Thomas Legend" serialized in the *South Madras News* in 1987, identifies this fourth century leader as the man whom the Syrian Christians converted into the first century apostle.

Thomas of Cana was probably Manichean, as Pauline Christianity was a Western salvation cult that had no place in the Middle East or Asia – and it was too early for fifth century Nestorianism, which, like Manicheism,

incorporated some original Nazarean⁵ teaching into its doctrine, to be adopted by the Syrian Christians. Even the Christianity of the apostle Thomas can only be called Nazarean and gnostic.

The Syrian Christians in Malabar subscribed at least partially to the Nazarean doctrine – they were originally called Nazaranis, and later Nestorians because of their close tie to the Persian Church, before becoming "St. Thomas" Christians – and this is attested to by the latinizing bishop of Quilon, Jordanius, who, in 1331, abandoned his flock because they were an "incorrigible sect of Christians who believed that St. Thomas was Jesus Christ."

Judas Thomas and the early Jewish Christians of Jerusalem did not regard Jesus as divine or as a universal saviour of mankind. Thomas, twin brother of Jesus, was revered as co-messiah with him. Together they were hereditary king and high priest of Israel. Their nationalistic cult travelled northwards to supplant the similar and ancient Greek cult of the Divine Twins, Castor and Pollux, at Edessa. Thomas had visited Edessa and instructed the king, Abgar, in his gnostic Nazarean doctrine. Among other things, this doctrine demanded strict adherence to orthodox Jewish law, repudiated the Virgin Birth and Resurrection, required recognition of Jesus as human messiah in the original Judaic sense of the word, and maintained a militant hostility towards Paul and the whole edifice of Pauline thought.

5. The Nazareans were an ancient sect of Judaism that, like their famous member Samson in the *Book of Judges*, gave special importance to uncut hair because they believed it contained power. Syrian Christian Nazarani men in Malabar also did not cut their hair until the seventeenth century, and wore it tied up with a small cross in a top-knot. Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln, in *The Messianic Legacy*, write, "Jesus was almost certainly not 'of Nazareth'. An overwhelming body of evidence indicates that Nazareth did not exist in biblical times. The town is unlikely to have appeared before the third century. 'Jesus of Nazareth', as most biblical scholars would now readily concur, is a mistranslation of the original Greek phrase 'Jesus the Nazarene'."

The Nazarean Christian hierarchy had come to Edessa from Jerusalem prior to the Jewish revolt of 66 C.E., and the oldest known Christian church had been built there. It is thus reasonable to say that the remains of Judas Thomas were returned to this important Gnostic Christian centre from Parthia – or Calamina, wherever it is if not in Greece, as patristic literature also assigns the martyrdom to this place.

In review, and a perhaps vain attempt to close this chapter on Didymus Judas Thomas the Doubter, four more historians must be cited briefly.

K.E. Job, a cautious voice among three archbishops, eleven bishops, fifty-three priests and an unspecified number of laymen who contributed to the *Mar Thoma Centenary Commemoration Volume 1952*, admits, "But there are few records enabling one to be positive about the scene of the activities of each of these Apostles (Peter and Paul) and how each of them carried out the commands of their Master." And, " . . . certain knowledge about the other Apostles (Thomas and Bartholomew) is absolutely inadequate."

Jarl Charpentier, in *St. Thomas the Apostle and India*, writes, "There is absolutely not the shadow of a proof that an Apostle of our Lord – be his name Thomas or something else – ever visited South India or Ceylon and founded Christian communities there."

Bishop Stephen Neill, in *History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to 1707 A.D.*, laments the spread of this spurious history among Indians. Neill spent many years in India and is an example of the religious man who does not need a falsified history to prop up his faith. He writes, "A number of scholars, among whom are to be mentioned with respect Bishop A.E. Medlycott, J.N. Farquhar and the Jesuit J. Dahlman, have built on slender foundations what can only be called Thomas romances, such as reflect the

vividness of their imaginations rather than the prudence of rigid historical critics."

Sita Ram Goel, in *Papacy: Its Doctrine and History*, has carefully analysed the reasons for the Church having spread this myth in India. He says that by claiming Brahmins killed Thomas, "the Catholic Church can malign Brahmins more confidently. Brahmins have been the main target of (her) attack from the beginning. Now it can be shown that the Brahmins have always been a vicious brood, so much so that they would not stop from murdering a holy man who was only telling God's own truth to a tormented people. At the same time, the religion of the Brahmins can be held responsible for their depravity."

And, "It is (intrinsic to) Catholic theology to claim that a land which has been honoured by the visit of an apostle has become (part of the) patrimony of the Catholic Church." "Since that auspicious moment when St. Thomas stepped on her soil, the Hindu claim (to India) stands cancelled. The country has belonged to the Catholic Church from the first century onwards, no matter how long the Church takes to conquer it completely for Christ."

K.A. NILKANTA SASTRI, in *A History of South India*, describes the conquering of India for Christ in the sixteenth century by the Portuguese and Pope Nicholas V who had divided the world between the Spanish and themselves. Faithful to the Papal mandate, the Portuguese "acted throughout as if they had a divine right to the pillage, robbery, and massacre of the natives of India. Not to mince matters, their whole record is one of a series of atrocities. They delighted particularly in plundering all rich temples within their reach, even Tirupati not escaping their predatory attentions."

He continues, "The Roman Catholic missionaries, headed by St. Francis Xavier,⁶ were not only (forcefully) converting to their faith large numbers on the pearl-fishery coast . . . but induced the fishermen to transfer their allegiance to the king of Portugal . . ." "The Franciscan friars and Jesuits were busy demolishing temples and building churches in the coastal cities, and the Portuguese governor of Goa was reported to be organising a plundering raid against the rich temples of Kanchipuram." "The Portuguese policy of (destroying temples and) turning religious propaganda to political use roused the resentment of even the tolerant rulers of Vijayanagar and their feudatories."

The French – and to a lesser extent the British – would continue this policy of destruction into the eighteenth century. Ananda Ranga Pillai, in his *Diary*, gives a graphic account of the desecration of the Vedapuri Iswaran temple at Pondicherry by the Jesuits and Madame Dupleix, the French governor's wife. He writes, "On Wednesday night . . . two unknown persons entered the Iswaran temple carrying in a vessel of liquid filth, which they poured on the heads of the gods around the altar, and into the temple, through the drain of the shrine of Iswaran; and

6. In a letter to the Society of Jesus, quoted by Sita Ram Goel in *St. Francis Xavier: The Man and His Mission*, Francis Xavier wrote, "Following the baptisms, the new Christians return to their homes and come back with their wives and families to be in their turn also prepared for baptism. After all have been baptized, I order that everywhere the temples of the false gods be pulled down and idols broken. I know not how to describe in words the joy I feel before the spectacle of pulling down and destroying the idols by the very people who formerly worshipped them." He did this after the Hindu Raja of Quilon had given him a large grant to build churches. In another letter he writes, "There are in these parts among the pagans a class of men called Brahmins. They are as perverse and wicked a set as can anywhere be found, and to whom applies the Psalm which says: 'From an unholy race, and wicked and crafty men, deliver me, Lord.' If it were not for the Brahmins, we should have all the heathens embracing our faith."

having broken the pot of dirt on the image of the god Nandi, they went away . . . "

But they did not stay away, and ten months later another pot of excrement was thrown into the temple from the church next door. Finally, two years later, when Pondicherry was besieged by the British and the Hindus were forced to evacuate the town, the Jesuit "priests of St. Paul" succeeded in destroying the temple in late 1748. Pillai writes, "Father Coeurdoux of Karikal came with a great hammer, and ordered the Coffrees and Europeans to break the images of Vishnu and the other gods. Madame (Dupleix) went and told the priest that he might break the idols as he pleased. He answered that she had accomplished what had been impossible for fifty years, that she must be one of those Mahatmas who established this (Christian) religion in old days, and that he would publish her fame throughout the world."

If it took the French fifty years to destroy the Pondicherry Shiva temple, it took the Portuguese as long or longer to raze the ancient Kapaleeswara temple on the Mylapore beach and build their St. Thomas church in its place. They, too, would succeed because the Hindus, who had resisted them over the years, ultimately could not resist their superior European weapons and guile.

THERE IS NO AUTHENTIC EVIDENCE for the existence of a Christian community or church at Mylapore before Marco Polo's time. Nor is there any evidence for the existence of a St. Thomas tomb before this date, though there may indeed have been a tomb or *samadhi* – the "yogi's temple" – of a Hindu saint. Such tombs were often placed near great temples or otherwise associated with them. T.K. Joseph, in *Six St. Thomases of South India*, argues that it belonged to the Muslim preacher-saint Thomas the Nubian, who was converted into the Christian apostle-martyr St. Thomas after 1517. He does not say who

effected this miraculous change of heart and identity in the dead Nubian, but clearly the Portuguese-Papal spirit was at work and assisted by the local "St. Thomas" Christians.

T.K. Joseph writes, "No document of any kind prior to the thirteenth century expressly assigns to the Apostle, as martyr or non-martyr, South India or a seashore tomb . . ." "Travancore's alleged St. Thomas *Charitham* (Biography) of 72 A.D. by his own Travancore disciple is no exception as it still remains unproven and unseen by the world in any century."

By recording, in 1293, that the tomb he saw belonged to St. Thomas, Marco Polo was only repeating tales told him by the local Christians. Leonardo Olschki, in *Marco Polo's Asia*, writes, "The authenticity of St. Thomas' tomb at (Mylapore) is almost as doubtful as that of Adam in Ceylon." "(Marco Polo) . . . accepted the opinion of the Nestorians of India, who venerated St. Thomas as the patron of Asiatic Christianity – mark, not of Indian Christianity . . . and was unmindful of those numerous fellow believers who, with more legitimate reasons, had set up a whole mythology about his legendary tomb at Edessa."

Friar Odoric, thirty years after Marco Polo, found only fifteen houses of Nestorians by a "church" filled with idols. Cordier, in *Cathay and the Way Thither*, notes that "this is clearly a Hindu temple." Conti, a century later, guessed there were a thousand Nestorians in the city. And Barbosa, early in the sixteenth century, found the "church" occupied by a Muslim fakir

M. ARUNACHALAM, in an article in *Christianity in India: A Critical Study*, records that, "The great temple of Shiva at Mylapore was situated . . . at the site of the present Santhome church even up to the end of the sixteenth century. It was demolished by the Portuguese vandals and their

missionaries . . . who erected their church on the site where the Hindu temple originally stood." "Later, devout Hindus built the present temple . . . at a different site, a few furlongs west, out of whatever they could salvage from the ruins of the old temple. A number of carved temple stones can still be seen on the compound walls of the church."

N. Murugesu Mudaliar, in *Arulmigu Kapaleeswarar Temple at Mylapore*, writes, "Mylapore (finally) fell into the hands of the Portuguese in 1566, when the temple suffered demolition. The present temple was rebuilt around three hundred years ago. There are some fragmentary inscriptions from the old temple still found in the St. Thomas cathedral."

Iyadigal Kadavarkon, the sixth century Shaivite prince-saint of Kanchipuram, Jnanasambandar and Arunagirinathar, the sixth and fifteenth century Shaivite poet-saints, have consistently mentioned in their songs that the Kapaleeswara temple was on the seashore.

V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, quoted in *Tiru Mayil Kapaleecharam Kumbhabisheka Malar 1982*, believed that the Shiva temple covered the area now occupied by the palace of the Roman Catholic bishop at Mylapore. This estate beside the St. Thomas cathedral, which includes a small museum,⁷ still contains scattered temple ruins.

The *Nandikkalambakkam* records that ancient Mylapore was a prosperous port under the Pallavas and the shore temple would have incorporated many characteristics of their architecture. The sixteenth or seventeenth century Kapaleeswara temple now in worship is in the late

7. This Santhome Cathedral Museum should be placed under the authority of the Tamil Nadu Department of Archaeology before its valuable contents are lost or destroyed. A friend of the author, who helped research this essay, was refused entry to the museum on three occasions, though it is ostensibly open to the public and he had an introduction to the person in charge from the cathedral priest.

Vijayanagar style with modern additions. Its inner sanctum door faces west – not east as is usual in Tamil temples – with the flag pole and Nandi also in the outer western courtyard. This arrangement shows that the present temple is a second temple, for the Agama Sastra does not permit a temple that has been moved from its original site and rebuilt to face the same direction as its predecessor.

Other epigraphical evidence, found in or near the church, is for two temples: a Jain Neminathaswami temple and a Nataraja shrine of the great Shiva temple. A. Ekambaranath and C.K. Sivaprakasham, in *Jain Inscriptions in Tamil Nadu*, following the Jesuit H.Hosten in *Antiquities from Santhome and Mylapore*, describe a stone in the eastern side of the church which records in twelfth century Tamil characters a gift made to Neminathaswami by Palantipara(yan). The idol of Neminathaswami was saved from destruction and transferred to Chittamur, though some Jain idols still lie buried by the St. Thomas convent.

Fr. Hosten also records seeing an eleventh century Tamil inscription in stone found "at the cathedral, north-west end of the verandah, on the top line of the granite foundations . . ." This stone, later moved to the bishop's museum, records a gift for the lighting of a lamp at night in the Nataraja shrine.

R. Nagaswamy, formerly Director of Archeaology, Tamil Nadu Government, and presently Director of the Indian Institute of Culture, Madras, in "Testimony to Religious Ethos" published in *The Hindu* of Madras dated 30 April 1990, writes, "A careful study of the monuments and the lithic records in (Madras) reveal a great destruction caused by the Portuguese to the Hindu temples in the sixteenth century A.D. The most important temple of Kapaleeswara lost all its ancient building during the

Portuguese devastation and was originally located near the Santhome cathedral."

And, "A few Chola records found in the Santhome cathedral and bishop's house refer to Kapaleeswara temple and Poompavai. A Chola record in fragment found on the east wall of the Santhome cathedral refer to the image of Lord Nataraja of the Kapaleeswara temple. The temple was moved to the present location in the sixteenth century and was probably built by one Mallappa."

And again, "A fragmentary inscription, twelfth century Chola record in the Santhome church region, refers to a Jain temple dedicated to Neminathaswami."

Modern epigraphists sometimes locate relevant carved stones in positions that are different from those recorded by their predecessors, and it must be noted that the St. Thomas cathedral area and adjoining bishop's estate has been much built upon and remodelled in the last hundred and fifty years. Today there is a quiet but concerted effort being made to hide the evidence of Hindu and Jain, and perhaps Buddhist, religious buildings that once occupied this sacred stretch of Mylapore beach. This effort coincides with the more zealous work of resurrecting the St. Thomas myth and making it into acceptable "incultured" Madras city history.

But the most interesting and convincing evidence for the existence of the Shiva temple at this site, is not a stone artefact but a long-enduring ritual. The Portuguese historian Gaspar Correa records, "For on their festival days the Hindus would bring their images accompanied by large crowds and great rejoicing and would, as they approached the door of the church, lower them three times to the ground as a mark of reverence to it, a practice which had been followed from time immemorial."

The practice had first been followed in the original Kapaleeswara temple, whose place on the beach was now usurped by the St. Thomas church, when the *utsava* idols,

taken in procession around the temple, were lowered at the sanctum door before the *muladeva*. The Hindus, by taking the Lord from His new temple to the church, were continuing the ritual and reverencing the ancient *mulasthanā* – even if Christians and Gaspar Correa vainly thought otherwise.

R.S. Whiteway, in *The Rise of Portuguese Power in India*, writes, "(The Portuguese historians) all . . . dilate on the discovery of the tomb of the Apostle Thomas at a spot near where Madras now stands; the narrative of Correa is singularly naive, and as he was an eye-witness of some of the earlier transactions, singularly valuable. It leaves a feeling of wonder that in such an entire absence of evidence the identification of an event historical or otherwise should be thought complete."

IN FACT, there is no St. Thomas at Santhome now and there never has been in the past. Ved Prakash, in *Indiavil Saint Thomas Kattukkadai*, shows how the Portuguese reworked the existing St. Thomas myth, changed the Syriac *be ruhme* meaning "by spear" to read "by Brahmins" in order to implicate Brahmins in the apostle's murder, planted relics in various places, fabricated new evidence for the apostle's sojourn at Mylapore, and falsified existing documents – activities which have also been engaged in recently by an archbishop and his agent.

These relics, according to the standard Catholic account, consisted of a skull and bones, a pot of blood-soaked earth from the Mount, a wooden shaft, and an olive-leaf-shaped metal spearhead – obviously Portuguese-made as the olive tree is unknown in India. They were "discovered" when digging foundations for the first church, in 1523, and "identified" as the "true" relics of St. Thomas – never mind that his various "true" skeletons and mummified bodies rested in five other places in India and an equal number of countries abroad.

Even the Jesuit "priest of St. Paul" Francis Xavier had nothing to say about these bones, some of which he received, or the tomb that they came from, when, in 1545, he was in Mylapore and assisted with the destruction of the great Shiva temple on the beach. Between 1542 and 1545 Xavier had had to exert himself to "clean up" the Coromandal Coast.

But these new "St. Thomas" relics were soon buried again "as the priest feared for the safety of the same" and subsequently lost. Today the cathedral has in its possession only a piece of bone and the Portuguese spear-head, which are exposed yearly on July 3rd for veneration.

Mylapore and the sixteenth century Roman Catholic church, which was the earliest church built on this site, were attacked by the Dutch, French and British. Rama Raya of Vijayanagar came in 1559, and R.S. Whiteway observes that "when St. Thome was held to ransom for the intolerant acts of some Jesuits and Franciscans the Raja of Vijayanagar kept such faith with the Portuguese that, as one of them says, such humanity and justice are not to be found among Christians."

The Golconda Sultans, the Nawab of Carnatic, and, later, Hyder Ali of Mysore occupied and besieged Santhome at different times. Because of these assaults, the Portuguese church with its two "St. Thomas" tombs was damaged beyond repair, and in 1893 the present Gothic cathedral was built. It was declared a minor basilica in 1956 by Pope Pius XII in an attempt to legitimize its so-called antiquity and bestow official recognition on the doubtful "St. Thomas" bones.

THERE IS NO END to the telling and retelling of this political tale invented by pious scholars and an interested clergy. But we must stop here, even as they continue to pray that the ancient lie will one day be accepted by Indians as truth.

Appendices

In Memory Of A Slain Saint

C.A. Simon

IT IS DIFFICULT TO SAY whether Mylapore found its place in the travel notes of many ancient foreign travellers because it had on its soil the tomb of St. Thomas or if the tomb itself was mentioned therein because of its location at Mylapore on the eastern coast. It is a historical fact that many foreign travellers used to visit this coast after sailing a long distance thanks to the Coromandel winds. Marco Polo, the great traveller, has referred to the tomb in his travel diary.

The present Gothic church was constructed over the tomb only in 1893; but it is going to be almost 20 centuries since the first church was constructed by St. Thomas, the father of Christianity in India, before his martyrdom in

73 A.D.

The tomb of St. Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles (disciples) of Jesus Christ, attracts people from all over the world. It is a pilgrim centre for Christians, especially during Christmas and Easter seasons. Its history, battles fought over the mortal remains of the saint, burial, excavation, relocation of the tomb, etc., all form part of a high drama the church witnessed over the centuries.

Today Santhome has in its possession only a piece of bone and the metal spearhead with which the saint was assassinated in Madras. These are kept under the safe custody of the priests. It is exposed for public veneration during the annual solemn novena for the feast of St. Thomas on July 3rd every year.

The expression "doubting Thomas" originated after Thomas, disciple of Jesus Christ, who was not ready to believe the resurrection of the Christ when it was narrated to him by other disciples to whom Jesus appeared for the first time after the crucifixion and burial. Thomas declared: "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger

in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."

According to the Bible, Jesus appeared again inside a closed room where all the disciples were planning their next course of action. Jesus called Thomas and asked him to put his finger on the mark of the wounds. Thomas was taken aback. Thomas felt divine reality encountering human weakness of doubt face to face. He was convinced. He knelt down and uttered: "Thou art my Lord and God."

Thomas landed at Maliankara (Cranganore in Kerala) in 52 A.D. with Habban, a foreign trader. He preached the Gospel, wrought miracles and went to Mailepuram (now Mylapore) and then on to China. He returned to Maliankara at the behest of the son-in-law of the Raja of Thiruvanchikulam.

St. Thomas spent the last part of his life in Madras preaching the Gospel. A large number of people listened and embraced the way of life preached by him. The oppressed and downtrodden followed him and claimed equal status in society as it was denied them by the prevailing social norms. He condemned untouchability and attempted to restore equal status for women.

Many stories are sung as folk songs and have descended to us through the generations. One of them about the origin of the church at Santhome is very interesting.

A huge timber log was washed ashore by the waves. In spite of the battery of strong men deployed by King Mahadeva, they could not succeed in bringing it to the shore. As suggested by some of his courtiers, the king summoned the saint. St. Thomas performed another miracle. Pleased by this, the king offered a place near the shore where the timber was first sighted. Thus the old church at Mylapore was built.

As he preached and performed miracles, enemies also grew in number and strength. They vowed to finish him. He had to spend some time in a cave at Little Mount hiding from

his enemies. Finally he was killed at what is now known as St. Thomas Mount.

His body was brought to Mylapore, buried and the exact location was forgotten for a long time. Later, in 1523, while digging for laying foundation for a new church they came across signs of the tomb. Immediately the priest in charge of the operation sought the help of higher authorities and then continued excavation.

They removed a lot of earth. After removing two concrete slabs placed between sand and earth they came upon pieces of bones and skull. At the foot there was an earthen vessel supposedly filled with earth taken from the spot where the saint's blood was shed. They further unearthed a metal spearhead having the shape of an olive leaf and also struck upon a wooden shaft.

The bones and other mortal remains were kept in a box and later buried at an undisclosed location near the church as the priest feared for the safety of the same since the news of possible attack by neighbouring kings were pouring in.

Rivalries among Dutch, French and British wrought devastation on Santhome. The Golconda Sultans attacked and occupied the place for years. In 1646, Mir Jumla, Nawab of Carnatic, also attacked.

Hyder Ali, Sultan of Mysore, besieged Santhome three times during 1769, 1780 and 1782.

Due to several attacks and siege, Santhome church was damaged beyond recognition. In 1893 the new church was constructed. The tall bell-tower is an evidence of Gothic architectural excellence.

The church was made a minor Basilica in 1956 by Pope Pius XII. The Basilica title is conferred on churches based on its antiquity, magnificence and celebrity. The word Basilica means a church with honorific privileges. There are only four major Basilica in the whole world. None of them is in India and the most prominent among them is the St. Peter's at Vatican.

The tomb of great historical importance is inside the church at Santhome near the sanctum sanctorum. It is open to visitors almost during the whole day. The Tourism Development Corporation on its conducted tours makes a stop at the tomb.

A lot of efforts are on to provide better facilities for the tourists visiting the church every day. Fr. Charles, assistant priest, further informed this writer that there may be celebrations on the 3rd of every month, starting from January 1990 onwards, with the help of parishioners.



This story, with two photographs of Santhome Cathedral Basilica, appeared on 30 December 1989 on the front page of the *Express Weekend* below a feature on Madras city history. No indication was given to show that one article dealt with popular legend and the other with historical fact. They were presented together to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the British city.

Ishwar Sharan sent a letter to the editor exposing Simon's story and it was published on 13 January 1990 in the *Express Weekend*. The paragraphs that were excised are reproduced here in italics. He wrote:

Apropos of the article "In Memory of a Slain Saint" (E.W. Dec. 30), it is indeed astonishing that the Indian Express allows its respected columns to be used to promote this Catholic romance as historical fact in this age of excellent critical scholarship.¹

In his book *Papacy: Its Doctrine and History* (Voice of India, New Delhi 1986) the historian Sita Ram Goel writes *about the St. Thomas myth*:

"Some Catholic scholars have been busy for many years marshalling literary and archaeological evidence in an effort to prove that St. Thomas came to India in 52 A.D., converted some

1. This paragraph was converted by the editor into the prosaic introductory line, "This refers to 'In Memory of a Slain Saint' (E.W. Dec. 30)."

Hindus in the South, and was killed by the Brahmins at Mylapore in Madras while giving the Good News to the local people . . ."

"It would be a waste of time to present the pros and cons of this controversy which tends to become more and more technical. Suffice it to say that some historians have seriously doubted the very existence of an apostle named Thomas. Distinguished scholars like R. Garbe, A. Harnack and L. de la Vallee Poussin have denied credibility to the *Acts of Thomas*, an apocryphal work on which the whole story is based. Some others, who accept the fourth century Catholic tradition about the travels of St. Thomas, point to the lack of evidence that he ever went east beyond Ethiopia and Arabia Felix. The confusion, according to them, has arisen because the ancient geographers often mistook these two countries for India.

"The whole subject has been examined recently by Stephen Neill in his *History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to 1707 A.D.* published by the Cambridge University Press, England, as late as 1984. He says: 'A number of scholars, among whom are to be mentioned with respect Bishop A.E. Medlycott, J.N. Farquhar and the Jesuit J. Dahlman, have built on slender foundations what can only be called Thomas romances, such as reflect the vividness of their imaginations rather than the prudence of rigid historical critics.' Pained by the spread of this spurious history among large sections of Indian Christians, he observes: 'Millions of Christians in India are certain that the founder of their church was none other than apostle Thomas himself. The historian cannot prove it to them that they are mistaken in their belief. He may feel it right to warn them that historical research cannot pronounce on the matter with a confidence equal to that which they entertain by faith.' Stephen Neill . . . was a bishop who had spent long years in India."

There is also reason to believe that St. Thomas Church stands on the ruins of a Jain Neminathaswami temple and a Hindu Shiva temple which had a Nataraja shrine attached. The epigraphical data for the existence of the Jain temple on this site is recorded in Jain Inscriptions in Tamil Nadu by A. Ekambaranathan and C.K. Sivaprakasham (Research Foundation for Jainology, Madras 1987). The evidence for the existence of the Shiva temple, which may be the original Kapaliswara temple on the Mylapore beach that got "eroded" by the "sea", is compiled in an excellent Tamil-language book called Indiavil Saint Thomas Kattukkudai ("The Saint Thomas Myth in India") by Ved Prakash (R.A.F.R., Madras 1989). This book is recommended for its wealth of

information and is available from R.A.F.R., 57, Poonamallee High Road, Maduravayal, Madras-602102.

When this letter appeared in the *Express Weekend* without the last paragraph, Ishwar Sharan sent a protest on January 16th to the *Indian Express* resident editor:

Apropos of my letter on St. Thomas and the St. Thomas church, I must observe that the truncated version published in the *Express Weekend* on Jan. 13th, which omits all reference to the building of the church, is not acceptable and does not do justice to history.

As a Catholic apologist was given prime space in the *Express Weekend* on Dec. 30th to tell his version of this controversial story, the *Indian Express* is obliged to give space to another writer or at least permit an open review of the subject.

The destruction of temples by Muslims has been discussed in the *Indian Express* by many persons including Arun Shourie, as has the destruction of Jain (and if I remember correctly, Buddhist) temples in Kanchi and Kashmir by certain Hindu kings. The Christians have completely escaped this review though they were the worst perpetrators of these kinds of deeds. This is ironical, for Christian missionaries continue to try to force conversion and destroy village temples in Central India.

The editorial tactic of only permitting Christians to criticize Christians does not wash and indicates a double standard operating in the newspaper. The editors have never hesitated to permit Christians to lecture and criticize Hindus and Muslims when they choose to do so.

The *Express Weekend* refuses to review Ved Prakash's *Indiavil Saint Thomas Kattukkadai* ("The Saint Thomas Myth in India") or even list it as a book received – though in fact the newspaper has received four copies of it.

When the Pope in Rome can no longer enforce the Index,² how is it that the *Indian Express* can censor our reading material, obstruct free access to information, and suppress discussion of a subject because it is controversial?

In honour of free speech, the very least you can do is give a fair review to this interesting little book on St. Thomas and the legends that surround him and the church at Mylapore.

2. The official list of books that Catholics are forbidden to read.

Ved Prakash's book was never reviewed though the *Indian Express* resident editor acknowledged receipt of a copy and promised to give it his attention.

But Ishwar Sharan's protest was noticed, and as he had sent out copies of his January 13th letter to a number of interested people, the excised paragraph would appear in the *Express Weekend* on February 10th in a letter from Swami Jyotirmayananda. His letter was cut, too, and those lines which offended the editor appear here in italics:

Sri Ishwar Sharan has rightly debunked the so-called historical feature, "In Memory of a Slain Saint" (E.W. Jan. 13), quoting distinguished historians *who have seriously doubted the very existence of an apostle named St. Thomas.*

In fact the feature that appeared in E.W. December 30th is false and misleading and there is a large body of evidence saying that there never was a Thomas at all, never mind that he came to Madras.

There is reason to believe that St. Thomas Church stands on the ruins of a Jain Neminathaswami temple and a Siva temple which had a Nataraja shrine attached. The epigraphical data for the existence of the Jain temple on this site is recorded in "Jain Inscriptions in Tamil Nadu" by A. Ekambaranath and C.K. Sivaprakasham (Research Foundation for Jainology, Madras 1987). The evidence for the existence of the Siva temple, which may be the original Kapaliswar temple on the Mylapore beach that got eroded by the sea,³ is found in "The Saint Thomas Myth in India" (in Tamil) by Ved Prakash (R.A.F.R., Madras 1989), who has provided a wealth of information on the subject.

This paragraph—for the non-publication of which Ishwar Sharan had taken the *Indian Express* editor to task—contained wrong information about the Kapaleeswara temple and to make matters worse, the wrong information was attributed to a wrong source. The correct source for Ishwar Sharan's wrong information about the original temple, was the T.T.K. *Map's Guide Book to Madras*⁴ which says, "Tradition has it that

3. The words "eroded" and "sea" should have been in quotation marks.

4. This popular guidebook, like others of its kind, treats the legend of St. Thomas in Madras as accepted historical fact.

the first temple was by the sea but erosion caused it to be shifted inland."

In fact the "erosion" of the original Kapaleeswara temple on the Mylapore beach had been caused by Christians, as Ved Prakash would point out in his letter to the *Express Weekend* published on March 3rd. He also observed to the editor that his own book on the subject had not been reviewed, but this reminder would again be ignored at the *Express Weekend*. He wrote:

This refers to the letter of Swami Jyotirmayananda published under the caption "Santhome Church" (E.W. Feb. 10). Certain details he has mentioned about my book, *Indiavil Saint Thomas Kattukkadai* ("The Saint Thomas Myth in India"), are incorrect as pointed out below:

He writes, "The evidence for the existence of the Siva temple, which may be the original Kapaliswar temple on the Mylapore beach that got eroded by the sea, is found in "The Saint Thomas Myth in India" (in Tamil) by Ved Prakash (R.A.F.R., Madras 1989), who has provided a wealth of information on the subject." But, nowhere in the book do I mention that the Siva temple on the Mylapore beach was eroded by the sea. What is mentioned about the Siva temple is as follows: "... many evidences available in Santhome church show how there was a Siva temple and it was occupied, then step by step demolished and converted into a church. Many documents and books also prove this. A fragmentary Tamil inscription of 8 lines on a stone found at the cathedral registers a tax-free gift for burning at night a lamp before the image of Kuthadumdevar (Natarajar) in the temple of Suramudayar (Suramudayar Kuthadum Devarkku) was found in 1924. It belongs to Vikrama Chola's time, i.e., 12th century. Moreover, when the *urchava murthy* was taken for procession from the existing Kapaleeswarar temple, there was a practice of lowering it reverently three times before the Santhome church at that time (16th-18th centuries). The temple was there up to the 16th century. Then, when the Christians started demolishing it completely, Hindus built the present temple out of whatever they could salvage from the ruins of the old temple." (P. 41-42, *Indiavil Saint Thomas Kattukkadai*).

The publisher is not R.A.F.R. Either it should be M.M.A.K. (Menattu Mathangal Araychi Kazhagam) or I.S.W.R. (Institute for the Study of Western Religions, 57, Poonamallee High Road, Maduravayal, Madras 602102).

This was the third and last letter published in the *Express Weekend* in reply to C.A. Simon's article. The letters were not a comprehensive or sufficient reply, but the *Indian Express* would not tolerate further criticism of the myth in its columns.

The Legend Of A Slain Saint To Stain Hinduism

Swami Tapasyananda

THIS ARTICLE has been provoked by two write-ups in the Madras edition of the *Indian Express*. The first of these is "In Memory of a Slain Saint" by Mr. C.A. Simon in the *Express Weekend* of the *Indian Express* of 30 December 1989, and the second, a rejoinder to it by Ishwar Sharan in the "Weekend Post" of the *Express Weekend* of 13 January 1990.

The first write-up, Mr. C.A. Simon's, whether based on facts or fiction, is highly derogatory of Hinduism, which is, even to this day, highly tolerant of other religions. The chief items of information contained in C.A. Simon's writings are as follows: (1) St. Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Christ (a disputed fact), came to India in A.D. 52 with Habban, a foreign trader. (2) He landed at Maliankara (Cranganore) in Kerala, preached the Gospel, wrought miracles, and got many converts. (3) Then he came to Mailepuram (now Mylapore), then went to China, after some time returned to Maliankara, and from there came again to Madras where he spent the rest of his life teaching, preaching and drawing a large number of the oppressed and the suppressed into his fold. (4) He performed miracles which made the local king Mahadeva offer him a place near the seashore where the old church of Mylapore now stands. (5) His conversion activities incensed the orthodox and enemies from their rank vowed to finish him. (6) He had therefore to hide himself in a cave at the Little Mount near the present St. Thomas Mount (about five kms. away from Mylapore). (7) Finally, he was murdered there, i.e., at St. Thomas Mount, by those fanatical enemies, and (8) his body was brought to Mylapore and buried in A.D. 73 at a spot which was forgotten for many centuries.

But the greatest miracle was to occur in 1523, nearly fifteen hundred years after the saint was supposed to have

died. That was the rediscovery of the tomb and remains of the murdered saint by the priest in charge of the Mylapore church for building a new church – pieces of bones, a skull, a vessel containing mud supposedly from the place where the saint's blood was shed, and a spearhead of the shape of olive leaf fixed on a wooden shaft.

Wonder of wonders! Even after about fifteen centuries these remains, including the stick, had not become fossilized or crumbled into dust, but could be got intact and buried at an undisclosed place in the church. That church was damaged beyond recognition in the course of the battles waged round it during the rivalry between the Dutch, the French, and the British and Hyder Ali. (Strangely, the Portuguese are not said to be involved in it, perhaps because they were the heroic defenders!) At last in 1893 the present Santhome Church with Gothic architectural excellence was built. (It must be by the Portuguese and none else.) The papal seal over this whole story was stamped in 1956 when Pope Pius XII gave it recognition as a "Minor Basilica", all the four major ones being outside India.

The above legend, that is dexterously built into a mighty balloon to boost Christian fanaticism, is neatly pricked in the rejoinder contained in "In Memory of a Slain Saint" by Ishwar Sharan, published as a letter to the editor in the "Weekend Post" of the *Indian Express* of 13 January 1990. The points mentioned by him are as follows: In his book *Papacy: Its Doctrine and History*, Sita Ram Goel writes:

Some Catholic scholars have been busy for many years marshalling literary and archaeological evidence in an effort to prove that St. Thomas came to India in 52 A.D., converted some Hindus in the South and was killed by the Brahmins in Mylapore in Madras. Suffice it to say that some historians have seriously doubted the very existence of an apostle named St. Thomas. Distinguished scholars like R. Garbe, A. Harnack and L. de la Vallee Poussin have denied credibility to the *Acts of Thomas*, an apocryphal work on which the whole story is based. Some others who accept the

fourth century Catholic tradition about the travels of St. Thomas, point to the lack of evidence that he ever went beyond Ethiopia and Arabia Felix. The confusion, according to them, has arisen because the ancient geographers often mistook these two countries for India.

He further refers to Stephen Neill's book *History of Christianity in India: From the Beginnings to 1707 A.D.* published by the Cambridge University Press, England, in 1984, as follows:

A number of scholars, among whom are to be mentioned with respect Bishop A.E. Medlycott, J.N. Farquhar and the Jesuit J. Dahlman, have built on slender foundations what may be called Thomas romances, such as reflect the vividness of their imaginations rather than the prudence of rigid historical critics.

Pained by the spread of this spurious history among large sections of Christians, he observes:

Millions of Christians in India are certain that the founder of their church was none other than apostle Thomas himself. The historian cannot prove it to them that they are mistaken in their belief. He may feel it right to warn them that historical research cannot pronounce on the matter with a confidence equal to that which they entertain by faith. Stephen Neill was a bishop who had spent long years in India.

To these we want to make the ensuing comments to disprove these assumptions of pious Christians. Further absurdities in Thomas legends are revealed in S. Muthiah's *Madras Discovered* published by East-West Press. The following are the facts gleaned from it: Thomas shunted between St. Thomas Mount and Mylapore, separated by about 5 kms., doing his preaching work and converting thousands. He lived in a cave at Little Mount in Saidapet, three kms. from St. Thomas Mount. There is, to the east of the cave, an opening which is said to have opened in those days into a tunnel from

the Little Mount to St. Thomas Mount. The saint is supposed to have fled from his persecutors through this cave. He was however murdered by them at St. Thomas Mount. Mylapore has only the honour of being the place where his dead body was brought and buried. From there his remains were taken to Edessa in Iraq where every July a great festival is held to commemorate his reburial. From Edessa they are said to have been moved to the Greek island of Chios, thence to Ortona on Italy's Adriatic Coast where they remain to this day. But each resting place still has some relic of Thomas – Madras has a small hand bone and the head of a lance in the St. Thomas Basilica crypt.

More miracles in proof of this legend of murder are yet to come. In 1547 the Vicar of Mylapore during excavation at St. Thomas Mount discovered a "bleeding cross" with old Pahlavi inscriptions. It had spots that looked like blood-stains which, it is claimed, reappeared after being rubbed away. This cross is built into the wall behind the altar of the church on the Mount dedicated to Madonna of the Mount. The tradition about this cross is that it was chiselled from a rock by the Apostle himself. It is said that it used to bleed periodically. The first publicly noticed bleeding was on 15 December 1558 and the last in 1704.

Apart from these fanciful anecdotes about St. Thomas in Madras, Christianity of a brand which had nothing to do with Western Christianity had come to the Malabar coast very early. Sometime about A.D. 450 one Canai Thomas with 72 Syrian families arrived in Kerala and whatever traces of early Christianity there were got mixed up with this Syrian brand of it. So these Christians, known till then as Nazaranis (Nazarenes), got also the name of Syrian Christians. Their connection to this day is with the Orthodox Church of Syria. The grafting of this powerful group with the existing fragmentary Christian groups must have led to the identification of Kerala Christians with the Thomas tradition, to which they hold steadfastly to this day. The St. Thomas of their

fancy must really be Canai Thomas of Syria. The members of this community were adventurous traders with business connections with many countries abroad, and through commerce they brought much wealth to the country. They therefore enjoyed the patronage of the local kings. Their numbers increased not only by the absorption of the existing fragment of the Christian community but by the influx of many Hindus from highly aristocratic classes owing to the rigorous rules of excommunication that prevailed among them. Such excommunications were common among them for breach of caste rules, and those excommunicated individuals, men or women, had no other course than to join this new community. This cross-breed Christian community of Kerala is distinguished from the converts by later Catholic and Protestant missionaries both in appearance and talents. In modern India they are everywhere found to occupy high positions in the professional and business life of the country. Their names too are usually different from the European names by which most of the later converted Christians were known till very recent times.

Now to go back to the legend of St. Thomas at Madras. It is clearly the fabrication of the Portuguese to camouflage their destruction of the Hindu temple of Kapaleeswarar which was situated on the seashore, probably at the very place where Santhome Church now stands. The great Saivite saint of sixth century A.D., Tirujnanasambandar, sings in the 6th *Poompavai Padikam Thevaram*:

The Lord of Kapaleeswaram sat watching the people of Mylapore – a place full of flowering coconut palms – taking ceremonial bath in the sea on the full moon day of the month of Masi.

In the same strain sings Arunagirinathar, who came to Mylapore in 1456, in his *Tirumayilai Tiruppugazh*:

O Lord of Mailai (Mylapore) temple, situated on the shores of the sea with raging waves. . .

This clear and indisputable evidence gives the lie to the legend that the Portuguese invented to hide their nefarious work. The Portuguese domination of Mylapore was from 1522 to 1697, by which time the British had established themselves in the Fort St. George and adjoining territories, and the Portuguese had to withdraw to Goa where their empire lasted till 1962. In Goa their rule was noted for a spree of destruction of Hindu temples and persecution of the Goanese, so much so that large sections of them had to flee that territory and settle all along the west coast of India. They are the Gauda Saraswats. The fate of these Goanese would have overtaken the temples and the people of Madras also, a foretaste of which contingency they got in the destruction of the holy Kapaleeswarar temple. Thanks to British domination of the region and the consequent elimination of the Portuguese, this tragic fate did not overtake them. The British had more political maturity and diplomatic perception, which helped them perceive that trade was more important for themselves than religious propaganda. And so they kept an attitude of indifference towards the religion and religious edifices of the people in whose midst they carried on their trading activities, which eventually led to the establishment of a political empire.

The destruction of the seashore temple of Kapaleeswarar is said to have taken place in 1561. The new temple at its present site, about one km. to the west, was built by pious Hindu votaries about 300 years ago, i.e., about 250 years after its destruction. When the Santhome church was repaired in the beginning of the current century, many stones with edicts were found there. Among them one mentions Poompavai, the girl whom Tirujnanasambandar is said to have miraculously revived from her ashes kept in an urn.

These are all matters of the forgotten past. Both the Kapaleeswarar temple and the Santhome church are now thriving and catering to the spiritual needs of the Hindus and the Christians. In such a situation it is better not to rake up the

memories of these unpleasant facts. According to forward-looking people many things of the past are better forgotten than remembered and ruminated upon. The history of the Kapaleeswarar temple and the Santhome church belongs to this category.

But the priests of the Santhome church will not allow this. They want to keep the flame of fanaticism bright. It is distressing to note the following passage in Mr. C.A. Simon's write-up in the *Indian Express* of 30 December 1989:

Today Santhome has in its possession only a piece of bone and the metal spearhead with which the saint was assassinated at Madras. These are under the safe custody of the priests. It is exposed for public veneration during the annual solemn novena for the feast of St. Thomas on July 3rd every year.

What is still more threatening is the concluding sentence:

Fr. Charles, assistant priest, further informed this writer that there may be celebrations on the 3rd of every month, starting from January 1990 onwards, with the help of the parishioners.

This attempt to keep up the fanaticism of the minority may inflame the fanaticism of the majority too, and lead to situations like the Babri Masjid controversy. All right-thinking men should foresee and avoid the occurrence of such a contingency.



This article appeared in the June 1990 issue of *The Vedanta Kesari* of Madras. It had been submitted three months earlier to the *Indian Express* but had elicited no response from the fearless newspaper – though, as will be seen, the resident editor was fully aware of its existence in his office.

Ram Swarup of New Delhi, on reading the piece, sent a letter on June 27th to *The Vedanta Kesari* editor:

Reference Swami Tapasyananda's piece, "The Legend of a Slain Saint to Stain Hinduism", in your journal of June 1990. I beg to point out respectfully that a most excellent article has been marred by a bad ending. Can't we in all veracity speak of Semitic iconoclasm without first accusing ourselves of fanaticism? And where is the much feared Hindu fanaticism in the so-called "Babri Masjid" controversy? Does it consist in our remembering that fanatic forces destroyed our temples and that we must do something about it? But must we start indulging in self-condemnation even before we have started doing anything and the issues have joined? In the language of the Gita, this state of mind comes from *hridaya-daurbalyam* and *karpanya-dosha* and can achieve little.

The psychological disarmament of Hinduism has been going on for a long time and we have learnt to pull down our defences even before we have built them. Unfortunately, it has been often preached by some of the best minds of Hinduism.

This letter was not published as *The Vedanta Kesari* does not publish letters to the editor.

Ishwar Sharan had also sent copies of Swami Tapasyananda's article to C.A. Simon, the Roman Catholic archbishop and the *Indian Express* editor. C.A. Simon responded on August 9th with a letter. He would have learned from the *Express Weekend* editor that Ishwar Sharan planned to include "In Memory of a Slain Saint" in the appendix of this book, and though he had not yet been informed of the project, he wrote:

Thank you for sending me the xerox copies of the article written by Swami Tapasyananda and published by *Vedanta Kesari*.

My interest in that article is purely academic as I am not championing anybody's cause. Also I was not aware of the version given in your letter or in the article.

Main sources for my article was two books:

1. *In the Steps of St. Thomas* by Rt. Rev. Herman D'Souza.
2. *St. Thomas Christian Encyclopedia* edited by Sri George Menacherry.

A few of the leaflets were also referred for the article. A facsimile of postal stamp released by Govt. of India during the occasion (said to be) of the 19th centenary in 1972 also was seen.

The speech given by Dr. Rajendra Prasad, former president of India, ". . . Remember St. Thomas came to India. . ." was also referred.

I am trying to say that the article was not written with any malafide intention, and I was not aware of the controversial version given by Sri Sita Ram Goel. Since I am aware of it now I note to honour the other version also.

I learned that you are going to publish a book and intend to include my article as the Christian version. As I do not stand for any religious sect or group you may desist from doing so. Instead you may refer to more authoritative works of this subject if you feel so.

Being a scholar of great understanding about the subject, I hope, you may take this in proper spirit.

You may bring this to notice of Swami Tapasyananda in order to clear any misunderstanding.

Kindly acknowledge this letter. You may feel free to write to me.

Ishwar Sharan replied to this letter on August 14th:

This will acknowledge receipt of your letter of August 9th.

My essay on the myth of St. Thomas has been written in reply to your article which appeared in the *Indian Express* of 30 December 1989.

Considering this, and that you and the *Indian Express* initiated the controversy by publishing the sly communal tale as Madras city history, you can hardly ask me to desist from reprinting it.

Your article is the subject of public discussion and a necessary reference, and is being reproduced as an appendix to my reply.

It is difficult to believe that your interest in St. Thomas is only academic. You have not named any unbiased scholar nor given any credible academic reference.

In fact you have written an excellent piece of Roman Catholic propoganda in the steps of Rt. Rev Herman D'Souza – who went to great lengths to manipulate Indian history and vilify Hindus in his work – and I must congratulate you on your success.

As you quote Marco Polo and Rajendra Prasad as proof that St. Thomas came to India, so Indians will now quote you and the *Indian Express* as further proof that St. Thomas came to India.

Your letter amounts to a disclaimer and should really be directed to the editor of the *Indian Express*, but if you wish to communicate further with me you are of course welcome to do so.

C.A. Simon did not communicate further with Ishwar Sharan and as no apology appeared in the *Express Weekend*, it may be assumed that neither he nor his editor regretted the publication of "In Memory of a Slain Saint."

Madras – City Of Neglect

Harry Miller

YOUNG PHOTOGRAPHER P. Justine braved the murderous traffic roaring incontinently up and down the Anna Flyover to take this infuriating picture¹ – infuriating because of the sheer gall of American evangelists coming here and not only proselytising but disfiguring public walls with their offensive posters. Our Corporation, hard-up and over-stretched as usual, have to spare workmen to scrape them off again, as seen in Justine's picture. Can't these tainted people be prosecuted? Why are they allowed into the country at all? Now see if you believe what follows, which is quoted from a leaflet, dated 1985, lying beside me. "A small van loaded with scriptures was hijacked recently – and our people lived to tell of it. Our Bible van was stopped and surrounded in the jungle by a gang of heavily armed men. . . Nervously the small band of Bible Society volunteers eyed their savage-looking captors. Surely they were only moments away from death. In India's jungles, who would even know where to look for them. . . The natives fingered their weapons. . . they had never heard the name of Jesus before... One of the team preached the first sermon about Jesus these primitive people had ever heard."

And so it goes on, ending with the usual appeal for twenty-five dollars – more if you can spare it – to bring the word of Jesus to India's ignorant natives. And where do you suppose this desparate saga of courage and fortitude took place? In the bandit-infested ravines of Madhya Pradesh? In the deep jungles of Bastar or distant Mizoram? No, believe it or not, all this is supposed to have taken place near Goa! Goa! Of all places, Goa, highly literate and solidly Christian since the 15th century. And if any of you ignorant natives out there

1. The photograph above this article showed Corporation workers removing a long line of posters from the flyover wall.

who have never heard the name of Jesus don't believe me, they are welcome to come and see the leaflet from which I have quoted. But before you do so it might be as well to be reminded that the very first evangelist – one Thomas by name – landed on our shores within a few years of the Crucifixion, some five centuries before America was "discovered". We have never needed another.



This column by Harry Miller was published on 29 January 1990 on the city page of the *Indian Express*. Because of its reference to the landing of St. Thomas on Indian shores – a provocative statement that the columnist and his editor could not have been unaware of, made as it was one month after the appearance of C.A. Simon's article – Ishwar Sharan sent a letter on January 30th to the *Indian Express* and Harry Miller with the request that it be published:

Apropos of the feature "Madras-City of Neglect" (I.E. Jan. 29), Harry Miller, like most Indians, seems unaware that the story of Thomas in India is in fact a Roman Catholic romance based on the apocryphal book called the *Acts of Thomas*. This work, which is included in Catholic bibles, has no historical credibility whatsoever according to eminent scholars like L. de la Vallee Poussin, A. Harnack and Richard Garbe. Other authorities maintain there never was an apostle named Thomas, while some who accept that he lived say that he did not travel beyond Arabia Felix and Ethiopia – two countries that were often mistaken for India by ancient geographers.

Gibbon wanted to know if this Thomas of legend was an apostle, Manichean or Armenian merchant.

Prof. Jarl Charpentier of Uppsala University wrote in *St. Thomas the Apostle and India* in 1927, "There is absolutely not the shadow of a proof that an Apostle of our Lord – be his name Thomas or something else – ever visited South India or Ceylon and founded Christian communities there."

Bishop Stephen Neill in his *History of Christianity in India: The Beginning to 1707 A.D.* (Cambridge University Press, London 1984), laments the spread of this spurious history among Indians.

Sita Ram Goel in his *Papacy : Its Doctrine and History* (Voice of India, New Delhi 1986), has carefully analysed the many reasons for the Church to spread and maintain this myth. Two pertinent reasons are:

1. By claiming Brahmins killed Thomas, "the Catholic Church can malign the Brahmins more confidently. Brahmins have been the main target of its attack from the beginning. Now it can be shown that the Brahmins have always been a vicious brood, so much so that they would not stop from murdering a holy man who was only telling God's own truth to a tormented people. At the same time, the religion of the Brahmins can be held responsible for their depravity."

2. "It is (intrinsic to) Catholic theology to claim that a land which has been honoured by the visit of an apostle has become a patrimony of the Catholic Church." ". . .since that auspicious moment when St. Thomas stepped on her soil, the Hindu claim (to India) stands cancelled. The country has belonged to the Catholic church from the first century onwards, no matter how long the Church takes to conquer it completely for Christ."

Moreover, there is epigraphical evidence that the St. Thomas Cathedral Basilica on the Mylapore beach stands on the ruins of a Jain Neminathaswami temple and the original Kapaleeswara Shiva temple that got "eroded" by the "sea."² The data for the existence of the Jain temple on this site is recorded in *Jain Inscriptions in Tamil Nadu* by A. Ekambaranath and C.K. Sivaprakasham (Research Foundation for Jainology, Madras 1987), and the evidence for the existence of the ancient Kapaleeswara temple, which was in fact destroyed by Portuguese Catholic missionaries in 1566, is compiled in an excellent Tamil-language book called *Indiavil Saint Thomas Kattukkadai* ("The Saint Thomas Myth in India") by Ved Prakash (Menattu Mathangal Araychi Khazhagam, Madras 1989).

This letter was not published, nor did Harry Miller acknowledge his mistake, and over the year 1990 – the period the articles in this section cover – his editor would occasion-

2. This dubious quotation (see page 29) would be brought to Ishwar Sharan's attention for months to come and in that it was questioned by so many, shows that the people of Madras were aware that the temple had been destroyed by Christians – a fact Ishwar Sharan states in the next sentence of this letter.

ally pass items promoting the myth of St. Thomas Ishwar Sharan and others would reply to these items, but their letters were never published and they would eventually have to concede that the editor was not going to permit the truth about this tale, or the City's churches,³ to appear in *Indian Express* columns.

3. Letters pointing out that Luz Church and Santhome Cathedral in Mylapore, Our Lady of Health Church on Little Mount and Our Lady of Expectation Church on Big Mount were built on temple sites were also suppressed.

Saint Thomas And Caste

I.S.

IN HIS ARTICLE "In Memory of a Slain Saint", C.A. Simon wrote, "St. Thomas spent the last part of his life in Madras preaching the Gospel. A large number of people listened and embraced the way of life preached by him. The oppressed and downtrodden followed him and claimed equal status in society as it was denied them by the prevailing social norms. He condemned untouchability and attempted to restore equal status to women."

This stereotyped and oft-times-proven untrue description of ancient Hindu society has been promoted by Christians for centuries. By repeating it C.A. Simon shows that his interest in writing the article is not "purely academic". He is championing a cause, and he has presented St. Thomas as the champion and pioneer of a cause – Liberation Theology.

This new role for St. Thomas is absurd, and whatever the merits of the new ideology – and they are doubtful – neither Jesus nor his brother Judas Thomas can be presented as champions of the oppressed and downtrodden if we are to believe the *Acts of Thomas*. Its first verses record that Thomas was sold into slavery by the very Jesus whose "message of liberation" he is supposed to have brought to India. They then describe how he enslaves the aristocratic women he converts and destroys their families. Finally we learn that this is the reason that King Misdæus of Parthia has him executed – and it is a good reason.

C.A. Simon seems not to have read the *Acts of Thomas* or heard the traditional Syrian Christian version of the apostle's "good works" in India. In this later tale Thomas only accepts Brahmins into his new creed, with the curious exception of one barber convert. This isolated soul is never given a place in the Christian community even during the apostle's lifetime, and to present Thomas as a champion of the poor is ironical,

even grotesque – but then Liberation Theology itself is proving to be just another means by which the Church can further exploit the faithful.

Today the number of lower caste converts to Christianity is myriad and they are no more accepted by their upper caste brethren than was their mythical first century ancestor.¹ The truth is that the Churches of India are riddled with caste and to highlight this situation, Scheduled Caste Christians demonstrated against the untouchability practised in the Church when Pope John Paul II visited India in 1986. They probably did not know that Pope Gregory XV had sanctioned caste within the Indian Church and that his edict has never been rescinded. Earlier in 1599 the Council of Diamper and again in 1606 the Council of Goa had sanctioned the same. These sanctions have governed Catholic practice ever since – though Christians piously maintain that caste is contrary to Christ's teachings.

The grievances of Scheduled Caste Christians remain to this day and often surface in the national press – to the embarrassment of wealthy bishops who have interests to protect other than those of their flock. This happened as recently as July and August of 1990 in the columns of the *Indian Express*. On August 2nd a letter appeared by Raju Thomas of Madras. He had spent ten years in a theological college and held M.A., B.Th., B.D. and M.Th. degrees. He wrote:

1. The Jesuit Albert M. Nevett, in *John de Britto and His Times*, writes, "In 1842 Mgr. Bonnard held a synod in Pondicherry for members of the Missions Etrangeres. One of the sidelights of this synod was that some caste Catholics thought proceedings were directed against them; they demanded that a wall of separation should be built within their church to seclude the outcastes. They also sent a report to Rome in which they regretted the departure of the Jesuits (during the Suppression) who, they claimed, knew how to adapt themselves to the customs of the higher castes."

No self-respecting Scheduled Caste Christians will ask the Government to include them in the Scheduled Caste list. Is it not shameful for the Indian Church, even after centuries of Christian tradition, to say that it has a vast majority of untouchable Christians?

I myself come from a state where Christianity reached in the first century itself before it went to Europe, and that state, Kerala, the highly literate state in India, has more than 35 lakh untouchable Christians out of a total population of 51 lakh Christians. But these majority Scheduled Caste Christians do not have any voice in the Church administration and in the ecclesiastical structure.

The Christian population of India is just 3 per cent out of the 800 million total population of India, and 85 per cent of the Christians are from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The Scheduled Caste Christians, instead of asking for reservation on par with the Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist Scheduled Castes, should demand that the Indian Church implement reservation first in their home itself. Charity should begin at home!

The Indian Christian Church has the best educational, technical and medical institutions in the country and it is unfortunate that the presence of the untouchable Christians in these prestigious institutions is worse than anywhere else. Why is the Indian Church blind to this brutal injustice and discrimination committed to its own family members?

While the Indian Church enjoys the minority rights guaranteed in the Constitution it violates the legitimate human rights of Dalit Christians. Instead of begging the Government the Church must render justice to her own "least brothers and sisters" by sharing power and wealth with Scheduled Caste Christians in proportion to their population.² The Church must respond to the cries of the Dalit Christians.

Once justice is established at home the Church can put pressure on the Government of India to get the Constitution amended to help Scheduled Caste Christians to get the constitutional rights enjoyed by their Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist counterparts.

This letter – in places self-contradictive – shows an insensitivity to the position of Hindus and ignores the financial privileges enjoyed by the Church. Christian religious and

2. Pope John Paul II has recently reaffirmed that the Church is an autocracy not a democracy.

educational institutions are fully autonomous and collect large foreign donations, unlike their Hindu counterparts which must accept state-controlled administrations and finance. That these foreign moneys collected in the name of the Scheduled Castes almost never reach the Scheduled Castes, is the cause of on-going scandal in churches of every denomination.

Ishwar Sharan did not comment on these issues in his reply to Raju Thomas. He had observed over the years that the Madras *Indian Express* while permitting Christians to lecture Hindus in its columns, did not permit Hindus to comment on what it deemed to be Christian matters. But he did take issue with the assertion that Christianity had reached Kerala in the first century C.E. as this was a matter of Indian history. The *Indian Express* now had two copies of his reply to C.A. Simon's feature which it had declined to publish even in summary, as well as Swami Tapasyananda's article which it had simply ignored. There was no excuse for the *Indian Express* letters editor to allow Raju Thomas his claim unless he wished to provoke a response. Ishwar Sharan responded on August 3rd:

Mr. Raju Thomas may assert that he comes from an Indian state where Christianity was established in the first century C.E. (I.E. Aug. 2), but he must know that his claim has never been substantiated in history. Even the generous K.S. Latourette, in *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, does not allow the possibility of Christians coming to India by any route before the third century C.E.

The consensus among most historians who do not have a theological axe to grind is that the first Christians to arrive in India, landing at Cranganore, Kerala, came in 345 C.E. They were four hundred refugees belonging to seven tribes of West Asia, who were fleeing religious persecution by the Persian Sapor II. Their leader was a Syrian who is known to history as Knae Thomman, Thomas Cananaus, Thomas of Cana, or Thomas the Merchant. It is probably this man whom the Syrian Christians later converted into the first century apostle-martyr St. Thomas.

Though the myth of St. Thomas coming to Kerala in 52 C.E. was invented by Syrian Christians, it was resurrected and embellished in the sixteenth century by Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries who needed a pious story of persecution to cover up their own persecution of the Hindus. During this period they and their Portuguese masters destroyed the great Shiva temple on the Mylapore beach, the Murugan temple on Little Mount and the Vishnu temple on Big Mount, and built Christian churches on the ruins.

The Roman Catholic Church continues to promote this vicious tale as part of her ancient effort to vilify Hindus and malign Hinduism – and, of course, to support her religious and political claims to India. Those interested in the on-going campaign may refer to an excellent article by Swami Tapasyananda called "The Legend of a Slain Saint to Stain Hinduism" in the recent June issue of *The Vedanta Kesari* published by Shri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Madras-600004.

This letter was not published in the *Indian Express*, but a copy of it had been sent to Raju Thomas and he replied to Ishwar Sharan on August 31st:

Thank you for the copy of your letter to the editor, *Indian Express*, Madras, dated 3 August 1990. I have been expecting that letter would be published in the columns of the *Indian Express*. But so far it is not being published.

I have already posted a long letter on this issue as many people have come forward with the same question about the existing of Christianity in the first century in the Indian subcontinent.

Yes, Mr. Ishwar Sharan, I too agree with your views that Christianity did not exist in the first century in the Indian subcontinent. It is only a traditional belief that St. Thomas had come to India and converted the Brahmins to Christianity but this claim does not have any historical proof. However, this traditional belief of the Christians in Kerala is so deep rooted that they relentlessly go on propagating it.

You may ask me if such is the case, why did I too assert that Christianity had come to India before it had reached Europe? My answer to this question is that I deliberately wanted an open debate and discussion on this subject. But except a few nobody has come with challenging theories or written in the *Indian*

Express. But why? We will be able to challenge and question such falsified histories and traditional beliefs only when we take up such issues to the public and do not keep them as the top secrets. But the question is: How many of our "intellectuals" are ready to have open-minded debates and discussions? Our sole aim is to eat, drink, make money and enjoy. This is the Indian reality. How many of us take up discussions on issues? We are concerned about the pension, non-supply of water, not getting facilities in the buses and trains, etc. Is this what a healthy society is to think and debate? I do not know.

I also agree with your opinion about the historicity of the Thomas Christians in Kerala in ancient Cheranadu. I also have some if not full soft corner towards your argument "... this man whom the Syrian Christians later converted into the first century apostle-martyr St. Thomas." I am sure provided much light is shed on this argument the truth will certainly come out.

Do you know the real story of these Jerusalem Christians who had come to Kerala? Today their total number is 1,60,000 and 1 lakh within the Roman Catholic Church and 60 thousand in the Jacobite Church. It is also unfortunate that these Christians (?) do not maintain any kind of relationship with other Christians in India, no marital relationship, not giving baptism to non-Knaya Christians in their church, not allowing Dalit Christians in their houses, etc. They want to keep up the purity of their blood. In fact they are the worst enemies of the Dalits in Kerala.

Your other remarks on the Franciscans and the Jesuits etc. have to be seriously studied. I am interested in this kind of research works. But do we have sufficient documents? I am very much enthusiastic to get that article "The Legend of a Slain Saint to Stain Hinduism" by Swami Tapasyananda published in *The Vedanta Kesari*. Would you help me to get one copy of this?

Thank you for writing to me. I welcome more enlightenment in these matters. I do not know whether the *Indian Express* will publish my letter which is a lengthy one.

The *Indian Express* did not publish his lengthy letter even in an edited form, but on September 5th Ishwar Sharan sent him a reply to this letter:

Thank you for the letter dated August 31st.

You will have received by now Swami Tapasyananda's article. He had originally submitted it to the *Indian Express*. They ignored it. After waiting three months he published the article in his own magazine.

I, too, submitted an essay debunking the myth of St. Thomas to the *Indian Express* in March. It was a reply to C.A. Simon's article which appeared in the *Express Weekend* last December. My submission was also ignored for months. Finally the *I.E.* resident editor rejected it in June with the lame excuse that he had no space and that I had already had my say in a letter published in the *Express Weekend*.

My latest letter, replying to your statement on St. Thomas, is only one of many sent to the *Indian Express* over the last eight months. Many others have written also and I have copies of their letters. None of these letters have been published. I am sure that your letter will also not be published. My long experience is that the *Indian Express* only publishes material promoting the myth of St. Thomas as true Madras history (excepting for the three edited letters which appeared in the *Express Weekend* early this year).

The *Indian Express* consistently suppresses all material, no matter how well documented, that shows up this political tale for what it really is.

So you see, Mr. Thomas, the "fearless Jesuits" in that editorial office are no different from your priests and our politicians. They are full of grand rhetoric and promises of salvation which it does not cost them anything to make. But the moment they perceive that the truth threatens their bank accounts and official positions, they are utterly ruthless in suppressing it and the persons who speak it. Gandhiji once said it was cowardice that was the threat to our nation, not poverty. I believe he was right – again!

As it is, I am blacklisted at the *Indian Express* offices and none of my letters are published any longer. This will please many of their Christian readers, for I am a long-time student of Christian history and a critic of Church politics and ideology.

This should not be misunderstood to mean that I am hostile to Christians of faith. This is not the case at all. In fact I see the Christian layman as the first victim of Church politics. This is why I firmly believe that Christian activists like yourself must go to the Church for redressing of your grievances before you go to the Government. To go to the Government is to let the Church off the hook. Why do that? What has the Church done for you really? The

whole edifice of the Church is built on the emotional, psychological and material exploitation of the poor and ignorant.

You know better than I do that the Church has vast quantities of foreign money meant for the poor but which never reaches the poor. You also know that caste is fully sanctioned within the Church. So-called saints like Francis Xavier, John de Britto and Robert de Nobili all practised untouchability – not to mention the fabled St. Thomas! There is one – perhaps two – papal bulls sanctioning caste divisions in churches and social relations. And there are the edicts of the Council of Diamper which sanction the same. To argue that caste is un-Christian is really beside the point.

But to return to the original subject of this letter. My essay called *The Myth of St. Thomas and the Mylapore Shiva Temple* is in the press but its publication has got delayed. It will be out in a month or so and I will send you a copy. You will discover that I make no statement and draw no inference that I cannot document.

I am very happy that you have written to the *Indian Express* about this issue. And I am sorry that your letter will not get published. But because it will not be published I would very much like to have a copy of it, if you would kindly send me one. I continue my study of this myth and am always eager for new references and points of view.

Raju Thomas did not send Ishwar Sharan a copy of his letter to the *Indian Express*, but in a note dated November 6th he said, "I am fully with your view that what the Christians claim of a St. Thomas of 1st century must be that Thomas of Cana." He also observed that Swami Tapasyananda had made an error in dating Thomas of Cana to 450 C.E. The correct date is 345 C.E., and it is confirmed by the Rt. Rev. Dr. Mar Aprem in *The Chaldean Syrian Church of the East*.

Thomas of Cana and the 72 Syrian families he led are the first Christians *by any name* to enter India.³

3. Swami Tapasyananda had written, "Sometime about A.D. 450 one Canai Thomas with 72 Syrian families arrived in Kerala and whatever traces of early Christianity there were got mixed up with this Syrian brand of it. So these Christians, known till then as Nazaranis (Nazarenes), got also the name of Syrian Christians." In fact Syrian Christians were known as Nazaranis up to the 17th century, i.e., until the Jesuits forcefully converted them to Latin Christianity.

Hideaway Communalism In The Indian Express?

I.S.

THE LETTERS that follow were exchanged between Ishwar Sharan and Madras *Indian Express* resident editor K.V. Ramanathan in June 1990. Up to this time Ishwar Sharan had firmly believed that his essay on the myth of St. Thomas would receive due consideration at the *Indian Express* and would appear in some appropriate form in the newspaper. When this did not happen for three months and his query regarding the article's fate was ignored by the assistant editor, Ishwar Sharan sent a registered letter on June 1st to K.V. Ramanathan:

Enclosed is a copy of the article on the St. Thomas myth which I sent by registered post on March 9th to Mr. Seshadri. A query concerning its publication was sent later and never replied to.

This article has been accepted by a respected publisher and will appear in a few months time as a book entitled *Saint Thomas: The Man, the Church and the Mylapore Shiva Temple*.¹

I am currently expanding the material, and on page four of the revised script will add the footnote, "This article was written in reply to C.A. Simon's 'In Memory of a Slain Saint' which appeared in the *Express Weekend* of 30 December 1989. It has not been published to date nor has the *Indian Express* resident editor at Madras replied to the author's queries."

It is not my wish to be unfair to you or the newspaper, and your comments or advice concerning the above note are welcome.

On the other hand, if you do intend to publish the article, or rather a summary of it as the full text cannot appear in a newspaper, then the same should be indicated to me within the next two weeks as I have a deadline to meet.

K.V. Ramanathan replied to this letter on June 11th:

1. This title was changed to *The Myth of Saint Thomas and the Mylapore Shiva Temple*. The copy submitted to the *Indian Express* was entitled *What the Historians Say About Saint Thomas*.

Your letter dated the 1st of June.

I find that *Express Weekend* carried on 13th of January a letter from you commenting on Mr. C.A. Simon's "In Memory of a Slain Saint". We have also published letters from Swami Tapasyananda² and Mr. Ved Prakash on the same subject. It is not as if, therefore, the *Indian Express* refused to give space to your point of view. The availability of space being a severe constraint, *Express Weekend* finds it very difficult indeed to publish long articles. You yourself concede in the last paragraph of your letter that the full text of your article cannot appear in a newspaper. We believe that having published your letter there is really no need for us to publish a summary of your article also.

All editors have the prerogative of rejecting material that they do not wish to publish and this right is strictly exercised in India where editors seek to mold public opinion rather than inform it. But given the reputation of the *Indian Express* as a fair-minded newspaper, Ishwar Sharan decided to do some plain speaking to this editor who equated a letter to the editor with a grossly misleading front page article and would thus absolve himself of further responsibility to the public. Opening his reply with the verses of Jnanasambandar and Arunagirinathar quoted by Swami Tapasyananda who maintained, "The Christian ecclesiastics' contention can be proved to be fraudulent with this single evidence", Ishwar Sharan wrote:

The Lord of Kapaleeswaram sat watching the people of Mylapore – a place full of flowering coconut palms – taking ceremonial bath in the sea on the full moon day of the month of Masi.
– Jnanasambandar

O Lord of Mylapore temple, situated on the shores of the sea with raging waves. . .

– Arunagirinathar

2. The resident editor had confused Tapasyananda with Jyotirmayananda whose letter was published on February 10th. But the mistake reveals that he was aware of Swami Tapasyananda's article, which had been sent to him three months earlier and ignored.

As you have bothered to reply to me with your letter of June 11th, I have asked Voice of India to alter the footnote³ in my essay on St. Thomas and the Kapaleeswara temple. But I do not know where the book is in the press and you may be too late with your sorry letter of rejection.

Your contention that I have had opportunity to have my say in a letter to the editor of the *Express Weekend* published on January 13th, is not acceptable. I need hardly tell you that a front page article presented as true history in a trusted newspaper is not refuted simply because a reader writes to the editor. Moreover the important last paragraph of my letter was cut out, which caused Swami Jyotirmayananda to write a letter which carried a serious mistake in meaning, which in turn caused Mr. Ved Prakash to write a correction. Those last two letters and the confusion caused by them would not have been made had the *Express Weekend* not deliberately tried to suppress the truth about the original Kapaleeswara temple and the St. Thomas church.

I am aware that you have a shortage of space in the *Indian Express*. That is exactly why my essay has been written as it is. Any sub-editor can pick out the material wanted and summarize it without distorting my point of view or conclusions. You may not consider this point of view to be of any value, but it is supported by over forty references named in the article itself.

Aside from poor Marco Polo, where are Mr. C.A Simon's references? And was his article only a point of view too? And why are you hiding this Mr. Simon so that nobody can write him an opinion?⁴

I note that you did not lack any space in the *Indian Express* when he decided to tell his lies about the Hindus. It may be the truth that the Roman Catholic Church can buy the space she needs from you. I of course cannot. I can only write letters to the editor!

Mr. Harry Miller stated in his column of January 29th that St. Thomas came to India. You did not lack space for this point of view but you also did not publish the letters refuting it. At least two letters were sent to you and him with supporting material. Again on April 23rd you carried an item about a cross planted in Kerala by St. Thomas, and again at least one letter was sent to you pointing out that this was not possible. This letter, too, was not published.

3. The footnote was deleted.

4. *Express Weekend* editor S. Viswanathan eventually sent the address to Ishwar Sharan by letter.

So the truth of the matter is that you do indeed have space to promote this ancient lie about St. Thomas coming to India to get killed by the wicked Hindus and especially the very wicked Brahmins, but that you have no space at all in your newspaper when somebody tries to unmask the fable (except for the three letters already referred to).

Swami Tapasyananda did not get a letter published in the *Express Weekend* as you have stated, but he has written his own article in *The Vedanta Kesari*.⁵ What he says cannot be ignored. And what Dr. R. Nagaswamy said in *The Hindu* on April 30th cannot be ignored either. Both are respected authorities in their respective fields.

Your letter of the 11th is disappointing for me. I did believe that I would eventually get fair treatment at the *Indian Express*. But this aside, what is really distressing is that it appears that you not only connive at this vicious lie being published in your paper to malign the Hindus, but that you actively support it by suppressing the truth no matter how often or in what form it is presented to you.

In "Hideaway Communalism" in the *Indian Express* of 5 February 1989, Arun Shourie writes about evidence and those who conceal evidence about the building of Babri Masjid. In the context of the myth of St. Thomas, his questions could be directed at journalists and their content could define the self-interest of Roman Catholic bishops. He asks, "Will we shed our evasions and concealments? Will we at last learn to speak and face the whole truth? . . . To see that these 'leaders' are not interested in facts, not in religion. . . but in power, in their personal power, and in that alone? That for them religion is but an instrument, an instrument which is so attractive because the costs of wielding it fall on others, on their followers, and not on them?"

And in an earlier paragraph he could be writing about his own editors when he says, "That is the significant thing; they have known (the evidence) and their impulse has been to conceal and bury rather than to ascertain the truth."

5. Ishwar Sharan did not know at the time of writing this letter that Swami Tapasyananda's article had also been submitted to the *Indian Express*.

But the bishops and editors are not the only ones to blame. We, too, must accept responsibility. We invite them to lead us around by the nose. We will do anything to avoid a confrontation with truth if it attracts the charge of intolerance.⁶

6. Since these lines have been written, N.S. Jagannathan has taken over as *Indian Express* editor and the newspaper has become another mouthpiece of the bishops. Ishwar Sharan had observed this trend in 1989 and 1990 and in a personal letter to the Madras assistant editor wrote, "When Mr. Shourie can expose the sordid history of Muslim iconoclasm, why is the same Christian history always covered up in your newspaper? After all, Muslims borrowed their violent ideology from the Christians and Jews. Aurangzeb is nobody in comparison to St. Francis Xavier when it comes to temple-breaking and bloodshed. Yet Muslims today must bear public criticism for their past while the Christians get off free. Why is that?" And to Arun Shourie he wrote, "It seems clear from a number of articles published and from the letters of protest or criticism sent to the Madras editor and suppressed (of which I have knowledge – obviously many more letters were received by the editor), that the editor responsible for the material published in the *Express Weekend* has consistently pursued a policy of promoting Roman Catholic doctrine at the expense of historical truth." "The manipulation of history and the suppression of facts is a major issue in this country... Christians, Muslims and Communists know how to write history and then how to rewrite it to suit their current ideological needs. When the *Indian Express* covertly supports one of these parties, in this case, the Roman Catholics, in rewriting Indian history, the affair becomes a matter of grave concern to everybody." "The Roman Catholic Church is the richest, largest and most sophisticated private publisher in India and the world. But this is not enough for them. They need the name of a fair-minded and respected daily to give their lies... credibility – and unfortunately for the people of Madras they have found this in the *Indian Express*."

I even think that some very important virtues are more likely to be found among those who reject religious dogmas than those who accept them. I think this applies especially to the virtue of truthfulness or intellectual integrity. I mean by intellectual integrity the habit of deciding vexed questions in accordance with the evidence, or of leaving them undecided where the evidence is inconclusive. This virtue, though it is underestimated by almost all adherents of any system of dogma, is to my mind of the very greatest social importance and far more likely to benefit the world than Christianity or any other system of organized belief.

– Bertrand Russell

Index

- Abgar, King, instructed by Judas Thomas at Edessa, 10
- Abban, see Habban
- Abraham, Rev. C.E., identifies Knae Thomas, ancestor of Malabar Christians, with Thomas of Cana, 5
- Acts of Thomas*, third century apocryphal work, 1; contents of, 1-3; describes events in Parthia, not in India, 3; neither good religion, nor good history, but a popular romance, 3; represents a repressive ideology, 6-7, 46; credibility denied to, 9, 27, 33, 43;
- Ananda Ranga Pillai, describes the destruction of the Vedapuri Iswaran Temple at Pondicherry, 13-14
- Aprem, Rt. Rev. Dr. Mar, 53
- Arabia Felix, confused with India by ancient geographers, 9, 27, 33, 34, 43
- Archaeological Survey of India, has not investigated early Christian churches built on temple sites, ii-iii
- Arun Shourie, 28, 57, 58n.
- Arunachalam, M., on the Shiva temple replaced by the St. Thomas Cathedral, 15-16
- Arunagirinathar, fifteenth century Shaivite saint, mentions the Kapaleswara temple on the Mylapore sea-shore, 16, 36, 55
- Attwater, Donald, regards the *Acts of Thomas* as no more than a popular romance, 3
- Aurangzeb, compared with Francis Xavier as an iconoclast, 58n.
- Babri Masjid controversy, 38, 39, 57
- Baghdad, migration of Christians from, 5
- Barbosa, early sixteenth century traveller, sees the Mylapore church occupied by a Muslim Fakir, 15
- Bardesenes, probable author of the *Acts of Thomas*, 3-4
- Benares, in Jesus-in-India stories, i
- Bertrand Russell, on truthfulness and intellectual integrity, 59
- Bible, the, an arbitrary collection of borrowed and often fabulous tales, 1n; Jesus in, 24
- "Bleeding Cross", discovered on the Thomas Mount, 5, 8n., 35
- Brahmins, villification of, i, 8, 8n., 12, 13n., 19, 27, 33, 44, 57; supposed to have been converted by St. Thomas, 7, 50
- British, the, continue the Portuguese policy of destroying Hindu temples, ii, 13, 14; fight battles at Mylapore, 20, 25, 33
- Burnell, A.D., on St. Thomas as a pious fiction, 9
- Catholic Church, see Roman Catholic Church
- Catholic missionaries, 36; destroy Hindu temples, 44
- Catholic scholars, build the St. Thomas myth, 33
- Ceylon, Church in, 5; no evidence of an apostle's visit to, 11, 43; Adam's tomb in, 15
- Charpentier, Jarl, on absence of evidence about an apostle visiting South India or Ceylon, 11, 43
- China, St. Thomas travels to, 7, 24, 32
- Chios, Greek island of, 35
- Chittampur, Jain idol of Neminathaswami moved to, 17
- Christian churches in India, early, need archaeological investigation, ii; built on temple sites and with temple rubble, iii
- Christian Community at Mylapore, no evidence of existence before Marco Polo's time, 14
- Christian fanaticism, 33, 37-38
- Christian institutions, collect large foreign donations for Schedule Castes but do nothing for them, 48-49, 53

- Christianity, presented as a native Indian religion, i; a religion of martyrs, ii; becomes a violent and destructive force in India, 5-6; of a brand different from that of the West, 35
- Christians in India, first, none before fourth century, ii; arrive in 345 C.E., 4,9
- Church, on the St.Thomas Mount, built on the ruins of a Vishnu temple, 8n.
- Church of Edessa, sponsors the *Acts of Thomas*, 3-4
- Church politics in India, victims of, 52
- Constantine, Roman Emperor, confiscates and destroys non-Christian writings, and commissions and finances new copies of the Bible, 1n.; paves the way for the Bishop of Rome to take over the Christian Church and the Roman Empire, 5n.
- Conti, Nicolo, fifteenth century traveller; finds only a thousand Nestorian Christians at Mylapore, 15
- Cordier, fourteenth century traveller, sees the church at Mylapore as a Hindu temple, 15
- Coromandal Coast, "cleaned up" by Francis Xavier, 20
- Cosmas, the Alexandrian, Nestorian, sixth century traveller, first to see churches in South India and Ceylon, 5
- Council of Diamper (1599), sanctions caste among Christians, 47, 53
- Council of Goa (1606), sanctions caste among Christians, 47
- Council of Nicea (326), raises a mortal prophet to immortal God, 1n; 5n
- Cranganore, first Christians arrive at, 4; St.Thomas lands at, 7, 24, 49
- Dahlman, J., Jesuit, builds a Thomas romance on slender foundations, 11, 27, 33
- Dalit Christians, worst enemies of, 51
- David, M.D., Christian historian, iiii.
- De Souza, T.R., Christian historian, describes large scale destruction of Hindu temples and use of temple materials for building churches in Goa, iiii.
- Department of Posts, promotes the St.Thomas myth, iii, 39
- D'Souza, Rt. Rev. Herman, misguides pilgrims through his guidebook, iii, 39; manipulates Indian history and villifies Hindus, 40
- Dutch, the, 20, 25, 33
- Edessa (now Urfa in Turkey), St. Thomas buried at, 3; cult of Divine Twins at, 10; Nazarean Christians at, 11; remains of St.Thomas taken to, 35-36
- Ekambaranath, A. and Sivaprakasham, C.K., find in the St.Thomas Cathedral twelfth century Tamil inscription recording gift to Neminahaswami Jain Temple, 17, 27, 29, 44
- Ethiopia, confused with India by ancient geographers, 27, 33-34, 43
- Eusebius, fourth century Church historian, places St. Thomas' mission in Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkmenistan, not in India, 3
- Express Weekend*, see *Indian Express*
- Farquhar, J.N., builds a Thomas romance on slender foundations, 11, 27, 33
- Fars, migration of Christians from, 5
- Father Coeurdoux of Karikal, Jesuit missionary, breaks Hindu idols at Pondicherry, 14
- Foreign money, collected by Christian institutions, 48-49, 53
- Fort St.George at Madras, Hindu temples obliterated in, iiii., 37
- Francis Xavier, first Jesuit missionary, 5; forcible conversions by, 13n., describes how he destroyed Hindu temples and denounces Brahmins, 13n.; assists with destruction of the Shiva temple but does not identify

- St. Thomas tomb at Mylapore, 20; the so-called saint, 53; greater iconoclast than Aurangzeb, 58n.
- Franciscan missionaries, resurrect St. Thomas myth in the sixteenth century, ii; demolish Hindu temples, 13, 20; embellish St. Thomas myth, 50, 51
- French, the, continue the Portuguese policy of temple destruction, 13-14; fight battles at Mylapore, 20, 25, 33
- Friar Odoric, fourteenth century traveller, sees at Mylapore only 15 Nestorian houses and a church filled with idols, 15
- Gandhiji, on cowardice as a threat to the nation, 52
- Garbe, Richard, denies credibility to the *Acts of Thomas*, 9, 27, 33, 43
- Gasper, Correa, Portuguese historian, records Hindu ritual proving existence of a Shiva temple at the site of the St. Thomas Cathedral, 18-19
- Gauda Saraswatas, Goanese who fled from Portuguese persecution, 37
- Gibbon, Edward, historian, wonders whether Thomas was a Manichean or an Armenian merchant, 9, 43
- Gita, on menal defeatism, 39
- Goel, Sita Ram, on Church motives for inventing and spreading the St. Thomas myth, 12, 13n., 44; questions credibility of the myth, 26, 33, 40, 44
- Golconda, Sultans of, invade Mylapore, 20, 25
- Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus in, stands for strife and deprivation of the poor, and denies heaven to women, 6n
- Gundaphoras, King, 1, 2
- Habban, slave-trader to whom Thomas was sold by Jesus, 1, 7, 24, 32
- Harnack, A., denies credibility to the *Acts of Thomas*, 9, 27, 33, 43
- Heraclion the Gnostic, asserts that Thomas died a natural death, 8
- Hindu religion and community, maligned by Jesus-in-India stories and the St. Thomas myth, i
- Hinduism, highly tolerant of other religions, but maligned by C.A. Simon, 32; psychological disarmament of, 39; villified by the Roman Catholic Church, 50
- Hosten, H., Jesuit historian, records seeing inscriptions of the Neminatha Jain temple and the Nataraja shrine in the St. Thomas Cathedral, 17
- Hyder Ali, of Mysore, invades Mylapore, 20, 25, 33
- Index, Vatican's list of forbidden books, 28
- Indian Christian Church, riddled with caste, 47; violates human rights of Dalit Christians, 48; exploits the poor and the ignorant, 53
- Indian Express*, promotes the St. Thomas myth by publishing C.A. Simon's inventions, 6, 26; truncates Ishwar Sharan's protest letter, 28, 52; suppresses important lines in Swami Jyotirmayananda's letter, 29; provokes but ignores article on St. Thomas by Swami Tapasyananda, 32, 33, 38, 39, 40, 52; publishes Harry Miller's article repeating the St. Thomas myth, 42-43; ignores Ishwar Sharan's comments on Harry Miller's article, 44-45; suppresses letters about Churches built on temple sites, 45n; publishes Raju Thomas' letter which repeats the St. Thomas myth, 47; ignores Ishwar Sharan's comments on Raju Thomas' letter, 50; ignores Raju Thomas' letter doubting the St. Thomas myth, 51, 53; rejects Ishwar Sharan's article on St. Thomas, 55; confuses Swami Tapasyananda with Swami Jyotirmayananda, 55n.; promotes the Roman Catholic doctrine, 58n.
- Iran, see Persia
- Iraq, visited by Judas Thomas, 3, 35

- Ishwar Sharan, letter from, truncated by *Indian Express*, 26, 28, 52; protest letter from, ignored by *Indian Express*, 28, 29, 32, 33; sends copy of Swami Tapasyananda's article to C.A. Simon, 39; advises C.A. Simon to write a disclaimer to *Indian Express*, 40; writes letter to *Indian Express* commenting on Harry Miller's article, 43; writes to *Indian Express* pointing out its promotion of the St.Thomas myth, 49; replies to Raju Thomas, 57, 53; submits article on St.Thomas to *Indian Express*, 54; does some plain-speaking in a letter to *Indian Express*, 55-57
- Israel, 10
- Iyadigal Kadavarkon, sixth century prince-saint saint of Kanchipuram, mentions the Kapaleeshwar temple on the Mylapore seashore, 16
- Jacobite Church, 51
- Jagannathan, N.S., new editor of *Indian Express*, 58n.
- Jain idols, found buried in the St.Thomas Convent, 17
- Jerusalem, 1, 3; home of Nazarean Christianity, 11
- Jesuit missionaries, resurrect the St.Thomas myth, ii, 53n.; demolish Hindu temples, 13-14; 20, 47n., 50, 51
- Jesus Christ, early years of, i; stands for strife and deprivation of the poor, and denies heaven to women, 6n., Judas Thomas identified with, 10; not regarded as divine or universal saviour, 10;
- Jesus-in-India stories, meant for maligning Hindu religion and community, 1
- "Jesus of Nazareth", a mistranslation of "Jesus the Nazarene", 10n.
- Jewis Christians of Jerusalem, early, did not regard Jesus as divine or universal saviour, 10; 51
- Jews, St.Thomas preaches to, 7
- Jnanasambandar, sixth century Shaivite saint-poet, mentions the Kapaleeswara temple at Mylapore seashore, 16, 36, 37, 55
- Job, K.E., says there are few positive records about the Apostles, 11
- John de Britto, so-called saint, 53
- Jordanus, latinizing bishop of Quilon, abandons Syrian Christians because they believe St.Thomas was Jesus Christ, 10
- Joseph, T.K., identifies the St.Thomas tomb as that of Thomas the Nubian, a converted Muslim missionary, 14-15; says no pre-thirteenth century document assigns a seashore tomb to St.Thomas, 15
- Judaism, 10n.
- Judas Thomas, i; beginning of a comprehensive study of, iii; in the *Acts of Thomas*, 1-3; may have evangelized Syrian Christians outside India, 4; never came to India, 6-7; forgotten till the sixteenth century, 8; was a Nazarean or Gnostic, 10; buried at Edessa, 11; cannot be presented as champion of the oppressed, 46
- Julian, Pagan Emperor of Rome, refuses to persecute Christians and assassinated by a Christian army officer, iin.
- Jyotirmayananda, Swami, makes mistakes in letter to *Indian Express*, 29, 30; confused with Swami Tapasyananda by K.V. Ramanathan, 55n., 56
- Kalahasti temple, fired at by the British, iin.
- Kanchipuram, rich temples of, plundered by the Portuguese, 13, 16; destruction of temples in, 49
- Kapaleeswara temple at Mylapore, destroyed by the Portuguese, ii, 14, 36, 37; mentioned by Iyadigal Kadavarkon, Jnanasambdar and

- Arunagirinathar, 16; present-day temple built in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, 16-17; lost all its buildings during the Portuguese devastation, 17-18; mentioned in a Chola inscription embedded in a wall of the St. Thomas Cathedral, 18; its site occupied by the St. Thomas Cathedral, 18; Hindu ritual at St. Thomas Cathedral retains memories of, 18-19; 29, 30, 38, 44
- Kashmir, Jesus made to marry a princess in, i; destruction of temples in, 28
- Kerala, first Christians arrive and settle in, ii, 4, 49; 5, 35, 48, 56
- Kerala Christians, identified with the St. Thomas tradition, 35; cross-breed community distinct from latter-day converts, 36; 50, 51, 53n.
- Knae Thomman, see Thomas of Cana Kottayam, Pahlavi inscriptions in, 5
- Latourett, K.S., historian of Christianity, says Christianity could not have arrived in India before the third century, 5, 44
- Liberation Theology, doled out in the name of St. Thomas, 46; means of exploiting the faithful, 47
- Little Mount at Mylapore, 24, 32, 34
- Love, Henry, wonders whether Thomas was the third century Manichean or the Armenian, 9
- Luke, co-apostle, 8
- Luz Church in Mylapore, built on the site of a Hindu temple, 45n.
- Madame Duplex, joins the Jesuits in the destruction of the Vedapuri Iswaran temple at Pondicherry, 13-14
- Madonna of the Mount, 35
- Madras, i; reason for promoting the Thomas myth at, ii; 5, 8, 18, 24, 26, 29, 32, 33, 34, 35, 40, 46, 52
- Mahadeva, King, accused of hiring the Hindu assassin of St. Thomas, 8n.; 24, 32
- Malabar, St. Thomas preaches in, 7; Syrian Christians arrive in, 35
- Malabar Christians, see Syrian Christians
- Malabar Church, see Syrian Church
- Maliankara, see Cranganore
- Manicheism, incorporated some Nazarean teachings, 9-10
- Marco Polo, thirteenth century traveller, first to mention a St. Thomas tomb at Mylapore, 14; repeats local Christian tales about St. Thomas, 15; 23, 40, 56
- Medlycott, A.E., Bishop, builds a Thomas romance on slender evidence, 11, 27, 34
- Menacherry, George, Christian writer, 39
- Mesopotamia, 3, 4
- Miller, Harry, on American evangelists, 42-43; retails the St. Thomas myth in the *Indian Express*, 43, 44, 56
- Mir Jumla, Nawab of Carnatic, attacks Santhome, 25
- Misdæus, King, 2, 46
- Murugan Temple on Little Mount, destroyed by the Portuguese, ii, 50
- Murugesu Mudaliar, A., says that St. Thomas Cathedral contains fragmentary inscriptions from the old Hindu temple, 16
- Muslims, destruction of Hindu temples by, 28; learnt iconoclasm from the Christians, 58n.
- Muthaiah, S., reveals absurdities in the St. Thomas legend, 34-35
- Mylapore, i, ii, iv, 7, 8, 14, 15; 16, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 43, 44, 45n., 50
- Nagaswamy, R., archaeologist, on great destruction of Hindu temples by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, 17; on the St. Thomas Cathedral occupying the site of the Kapaleeswara temple, 17-18; cannot be ignored, 57
- Nairs, position of, obtained by Syrian Christians, ii

- Namboodiris, claimed as ancestors by Syrian Christians, ii
- Nataraja, image of, in the Kapaleeswara temple, referred to in inscription in the wall of the St. Thomas Cathedral, 18
- Nataraja Shrine of the great Shiva temple, mentioned in inscriptions found in the St. Thomas Cathedral, 17; 27, 29
- Nawab of Carnatic, 20, 25, 26
- Nazaranis, original name of Syrian Christians, 10, 35, 53n.
- Nazarean doctrine, demanded adherence to Jewish Law, and repudiated Virgin Birth and the Resurrection, 10
- Nazareth, did not exist in biblical time, 10n.
- Neander, M. Augustus, historian of Christianity, regards writings on apostolic fathers as spurious, 4
- Nehru, Jawaharlal, a poor historian, iii
- Neill, Stephen, Bishop, laments spread of spurious history vis-a-vis St. Thomas among Syrian Christians, 11-12, 27, 33, 43
- Neminathaswami, idol of, transferred from Mylapore to Chittampur, 17
- Neminathaswami Jain temple, mentioned in inscriptions found in the St. Thomas Cathedral, 17, 18, 27, 29, 44
- Nestorianism, fifth century doctrine, 9; could not have been adopted by early Syrian Christians, 10
- Nestorians, latter-day name of Syrian Christians, 10; venerate St. Thomas as the patron of Asiatic, not Indian, Christianity, 15
- New Testament, does not account for the early years of Jesus, i; does not support C. A. Simon's statements, 6-7
- New Testament books, dates and authors of, 1
- Nilkanta Sastri, K.A., on conquering of India for Christ and the doings of the Portuguese and the Christian missionaries, 12-13
- Nineveh, migration of Christians from, 5
- Non-Knaya Christians, denied baptism in Syrian churches, 51
- Orthodox Church of Syria, Syrian Christians connected with, 35
- Ortona, on the Adriatic Coast, 35
- Olschki, Leonardo, doubts whether Marco Polo saw a St. Thomas tomb at Mylapore, 15
- Our Lady of Expectation Church, on Big Mount and Our Lady of Health Church on Little Mount, built on the sites of Hindu temples, 45n.
- Pagan (Hindu) priests, portrayed as persecutors of Jesus and St. Thomas, i
- Pahlavi inscriptions, 5, 35
- Pallavas, 16
- Palur, St. Thomas tales set in, i; Brahmins of, 7
- Parthia, true place of St. Thomas' mission and martyrdom 3-4; confused with India by ancient geographers, 9; remains of Judas Thomas returned from 11; King Misdaeus of, 46
- Pauline Christianity, a Western salvation cult unknown in the Middle East or Asia, 9; faces hostility from the Nazarean doctrine, 10
- Persia, place of Judas Thomas' mission, 3, 4; another major migration of Christians from, 5; confused with India by ancient geographers, 9
- Persian Church, connection of, with Malabar Church, 5, 10
- Persian or so-called St. Thomas Crosses, confirm Malabar Church's connection with the Persian Church, 5, 8n., 35
- Pondicherry, Vedapuri Iswaran temple in, 13-14; synod in, 47n
- Pope Gregory XIV (1621-1623), sanctions caste divisions in the Indian Church, 6, 47

- Pope in Rome, can no longer enforce the Index, 28
- Pope John Paul II, faces demonstration of Scheduled Caste Christians, 47; affirms that the Church is an autocracy, 48
- Pope Nicholas V, divides the world between the Portuguese and the Spanish, 12
- Pope Pius XII, legitimizes the St. Thomas myth, 20, 25, 33
- Portuguese, the, secular arm of the Church, ii, destroy many Hindu temples in Madras, ii; serve papal and their own interest by floating the St. Thomas myth, 6; decide to discover bones of St. Thomas in the sixteenth century, 8; their doings in India, 12-13, 17; destroy the Kapaleswara temple at Mylapore and build St. Thomas Church on its site, 14, 15-16, 17-18, 20, 36, 50; rework the St. Thomas myth, 19, 36; not mentioned as invaders by C.A. Simon, 32; persecute the Hindus, 50
- Portuguese Governor of Goa, organizes raids on rich Hindu temples of Kanchipuram, 13
- Portuguese policy, rouses resentment of Hindu rulers of Vijayanagar, 13
- Poussin, L. de la, denies credibility to the *Acts of Thomas*, 9, 27, 33, 43
- Priolkar, A.K., documents large-scale destruction of Hindu temples and idols, iiin.
- Protestant Church in the Far East, first by the portugese, iiin.
- Protestant missionaries, 36
- Puri, Jesus-in-India stories set in, i; Jagannath temple at, 7
- Quilon, church in, 5; bishop of, 10; Raja of, 13n.
- Rae, Rev. George Melne, regards the *Acts of Thomas* a Gnostic work, 3-4
- Rajendra Prasad, President of India, promotes the St. Thomas myth, 3-4
- Ram Swarup, on self-destructive self-criticism by Hindus, 38-39
- Rama Raya, Raja of Vijayanagar, humanity and justice of, 20
- Ramachandra Dikshitar, V.R., on the site of the Shiva temple at Mylapore, 16
- Ramanathan, K.V., resident editor of *Indian Express* in Madras, replies to Ishwar Sharan, 54
- Robert de Nobili, the so-called saint, 53
- Roman Catholic Bishop's palace at Mylapore, occupies the site of the Shiva temple, 16
- Roman Catholic Church, harbours illusions of world power, i, 50; promotes the St. Thomas myth, 8; motives of, for floating the myth, 12, 44; claims India as its patrimony, 12; villifies Hindus and Hinduism, 50, 51, 56; richest publisher in India, 58n.
- Roman Catholic propaganda, 40, 44
- Roman Catholicism, claims religious hegemony over India, i
- Roman Catholics, adopt caste divisions, 6
- Roman Empire, pagan temples destroyed in, by Christians, iin.
- Roman Paganism, Julian returns to, iin.
- Rome, Persia's arch enemy, becomes Christianized, 5
- Santhome Cathedral Museum, should be placed under Tamil Nadu Department of Archaeology to prevent loss or destruction of contents, 16n
- Sapor II, Persian Emperor, drives out Christians from his domain, 4-5, 49
- Scheduled Caste Christians, demonstrate during the Pope's visit, 47
- Semitic iconoclasm, 39
- Shri Krishna, wonders worked by, introduced in St. Thomas story, 7
- Shri Ramakishna Math, 5

- Simon, C.A., retails pure inventions about St. Thomas, 6-7, 23-26; 31, 32, 38; disclaims authentic knowledge, 39; advised to write a disclaimer in the *Indian Express*, 40, ignores the advice, 41; 43, 52
- Sivaprakasham, C.K., see Ekambarath, A.
- Six *St. Thomases of South India*, 14
- Smith, V.A., see Vincent Smith, A
- Society of Jesus, 13n.
- South Indian schools, falsehoods taught in, 7
- St. Thomas, stories about, i; should be investigated by archaeologists and philosophers, iv; associated with the Church of Edessa, 3; known only as Judas Thomas, 3; story of, as current in India, 7-8; identified with Jesus Christ by Syrian Christians, 10; venerated by Nestorians as patron of Asiatic, not Indian, Christianity, 15; 26, 27, 28, 29, 32, 33, 34, 35, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 46, 49, 50, 51, 52; practises untouchability, 53-54, 56
- St. Thomas Biography*, a non-existent work, 7, 15
- "St. Thomas Christians", 8; before becoming, 10; historicity of, 51
- St. Thomas Church at Mylapore, built on the site of the Kapaleeswara Shiva temple, 14, 36; carries in its walls carved stones from Hindu temples, 16; estate of, scattered with temple ruins, 16; evidence of Jain and Shaiva temples in, 17; contains in its wall Chola record mentioning the Kapaleeswara temple, 18; built first in the sixteenth century, 20; 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 33, 34, 37, 38; provides epigraphical evidence of temple destruction, 44, 45n., 56
- St. Thomas Crosses, see Persian Crosses
- St. Thomas Mount, Persian Cross with Pahlavi inscription discovered at, 5, 8n., 35; St. Thomas speared at, 8; description of, 8n.
- St. Thomas myth, nature of i; invented in the sixteenth century, ii; maintained by the Government of India, the national media and historians, iii; reworked by the Portuguese for serving political needs of the Church, 6, 19, 36; being resurrected for hiding evidence about destruction of Buddhist, Jain and Brahmanical temples, 18; legitimized by Pope Pius II, 20; built by Catholic scholars, 33, 49
- St. Thomas relics, Portuguese-made, 19; not identified as such by Francis Xavier while destroying the Shiva temple at Mylapore, 20; only a piece of bone, 23; buried at an undisclosed location, 25; rediscovery of, the greatest miracle, 32-33; resting places of, 35
- St. Thomas Song of 1601*, non-existent till 1893, 7
- St. Thomas tomb at Mylapore, existence of, no evidence before Marco Polo's time, 14
- Syria, Judas Thomas travels to, 3
- Syrian Christians, claim Brahmin descent, ii; style themselves St. Thomas Christians, 4; leader of, 5; adopt caste divisions, 6; transform Thomas of Cana into St. Thomas, 9; originally known as Nazaranis and later on as Nestorians, 10, 53n.; a Nazarean sect, 10n.; arrive in Malabar, 35; patronised by local Hindu kings, 36-37; 46; invent the St. Thomas myth, 49; 51, 51n.
- Syrian Church, i; connected with the Persian Church, 5, 10
- Syrian Orthodoxy, claims hegemony over India, i
- Tamil inscriptions, discovered in St. Thomas Cathedral, 30
- Tapasyananda, Swami, his article on St. Thomas ignored by *Indian Express*, iii; on the myth of St. Thomas, 32-38; on Christian fanaticism, 33, 37-38; 39, 40, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 53n.,

- 55; confused with Swami Jyotir-mayananda by *Indian Express*, 55n; 57, 57n.
- Thiruvanchikulam, Raja of, 4, 24
- Thomas of Cana or Thomas Cananaus or Knae Thomman or Thomas the Merchant, leader of the first Christians who arrived in India in the fourth century, 5, 49; transformed into St. Thomas by Syrian Christians, 9; was probably a Manichean, 9; 35, 36, 53, 53n.
- Thomas Crosses, see Persian Crosses
- Thomas, Raju, on the plight of lower caste converts, 47-48, 49; replies to Ishwar Sharan rejecting historicity of St. Thomas tradition, 50; 52, 53
- Thomas Mount at Madras, 5, 8; description of 8n; 32, 34, 35
- Tirujnanasambadar, see Jnanasambadar
- Tirumalai Nayak Mahal at Madura, partly demolished by the British, iiii.
- Tirupati temple, plundered by the Portuguese, 12
- Tourist Development, Corporation, promotes the St. Thomas myth, 26
- Toynbee, Arnold, historian, regards St. Thomas' mission and death in India as legendry, iii-iv
- Turkmenistan, Judas Thomas travels to, 3
- Vasco da Gama, renders Christianity a destructive force in India, 5-6
- Ved Prakash, on how the Portuguese concocted the St. Thomas myth, 19, 27, 28, 29, 30, 44, 55, 56
- Vedanta Kesari*, 38, 39, 50, 51, 57
- Vedantham, T.R., identifies St. Thomas as the fourth century Thomas of Cana, 9
- Vedapuri Iswaran temple at Pondicherry, destroyed by the Jesuits patronized by the French, 13-14
- Vicar of Mylapore, discovers in 1547 a "Bleeding Cross" with Pahlavi inscriptions, 35
- Vijayanagar, tolerant rulers of, 13; Rama Raya of, 20
- Vikrama Chola, 30
- Vincent Smith, A., historian, doubts martyrdom of St. Thomas, 8
- Vishnu, images of, destroyed by the Jesuits in Pondicherry, 14; temple of, on the Big Mount at Mylapore, destroyed by the Portuguese, ii, 8n., 50
- Viswanathan, S., editor of *Express Weekend*, 56n
- Voice of India, publishers, 56
- Western spiritualists, invent Jesus-in-India stories, i
- Whiteway, R.S., on the futility of Portuguese historians trying to locate St. Thomas tomb at Mylapore, 19; contrasts Christian intolerance with Hindu humanity and justice, 20

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