

VERY REV. IYPE THOMA KATHANAR (KOVOOR ACHEN)

1842-1917



Life story of Vicar General
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Published by:
Adv. John Joseph Nalloor
Nalloor
Kuriannoor- 689550
Tiruvalla
Kerala, India
advocatenalloor@gmail.com

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KOVOOR ACHEN

Vicar General Kovoov Iype Thoma Kathanar

(2 Dec. 1842 to 27 Jan. 1917)

“In all the calamities he had to go through, and in all the difficulties he had to face, Titus I Mar Thoma had the counsel and support of the Very Rev. Ipe Thoma Kathanar, who was Vicar General of the Church. He was a man of iron will and his personality gave confidence and hope not only to the Metropolitan but also to the priests and members of the Church, when in doubt or despair about the future. His advice and help was available to Titus II Metropolitan during the first part of his period of administration”.

- The Most Rev. Juhanon Mar Thoma “Christianity in India and a Brief History of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church.

“During the difficult period following the reformation, Kovoov Achen was a tower of strength. With great farsightedness he acquired the property which is now at the heart of Tiruvalla and where the headquarters of the Mar Thoma Church is situated. Thomas Mar Athanasius Metropolitan was helped and strengthened by the Vicar General and a group of other able clergymen”

- Alexander Mar Thoma Metropolitan, “The Mar Thoma Church Heritage and Mission.

Christianity was brought to India by St. Thomas an Apostle of Jesus Christ. St. Thomas reached the Malabar Coast in 52 A.D. and converted many high caste Hindus and established 7 churches. We do not know much about the history of the Kerala Christian Church in the first few centuries. Many explorers during their travels recorded the existence of a very active church in Malabar. Records of the visits of church leaders from Asia Minor, Palestine and Persia during this time are available. The Malabar Church always welcomed foreign leaders without enquiring much about their faith and practices. The Church in Malabar remained as an isolated church.

The Malankara Church was an Independent Church even though it had connections with Syrian churches. It was not under the supremacy of any foreign Bishop or Church. Portuguese sailor, Vasco de Gamma, arrived in Malabar in 1498. He was a member of the Roman Catholic Church which owed its allegiance to the Pope in Rome. The Portuguese people under the leadership of the Archbishop, Alexio de Menezies, convened a meeting of all church leaders in a

place called Diamper (Udayamperoor) near Ernakulam in 1599. Menezies succeeded in bringing the Malankara Church under the domination of the Pope. This state of affairs continued for 54 years. But the people, who objected this movement, were concerned for the independence of the Church, assembled in a Church compound in Mattancherry (Cochin) in 1653 and took an oath severing all connections with the Roman Catholic Church. This oath ceremony is known as the "Oath of the Coonan Cross." Hence the Church regained its independence, but some people remained with the Roman Catholic Church.

After the 'Oath of the Coonan Cross', the Malankara Church continued its connections with the Patriarch of Antioch. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, missionaries of the Church Missionary Society came to Kerala. With the help of these foreign missionaries, the Bible was translated into Malayalam. The New Testament was published in 1829, the Old Testament in 1835 and the complete Bible in 1841. Reading the Scriptures in their own language enlightened the common man. Missionaries even started a Theological College (Old Seminary) in Kottayam to train priests.

Abraham Malpan and Kaithayil Geevarghese Malpan were teachers at the Old Seminary, Kottayam. Both of them tried to restore the church to its original purity by casting away wrong teachings and evil practices that crept in due to its association with other churches and religions in the course of time. In 1836, Abraham Malpan and 11 other priests submitted a memorandum to the British resident Col. Fraser, requesting him to do what was required to make necessary changes in the Church. But he couldn't do anything, so Abraham Malpan gave leadership for the Reformation movement in the Syrian Church.

Reforms made by Abraham Malpan:

1. Worship services including Holy Communion were conducted in Malayalam
2. Prayers to the Saints and prayers for the dead were removed from worship books.
3. Changes were made to various prayers in the prayer books incorporating the divine light received through the study of the Bible.

Abraham Malpan passed away on Sep7, 1845, when the reformation movement was in full swing. God, who gave Joshua to the Israelites after the death of Moses, gave two great leaders to the Syrian Church to keep the light of reformation burning, Mathews Mar Athanasius Metropolitan (1818-1877) and Koor Eipe Thoma Kathanar (1842-1917).

Birth and Primary Education

The Kovoov family is one of the wealthy and traditional Christian families of Tiruvalla. Kovoov Achen (Iype Thommy) was born on 2 Dec. 1842 (17 Virchikam 1017, M.E.). His father, Kovoov Thommy Iype, was a benevolent timber merchant who helped needy people in their difficulties. Achen's mother, Mariamma, was the daughter of Ittycheria Punoose, Pulimoottil, Tiruvalla. Mariamma was a student of the CMS School in Tiruvalla. Kovoov Achen had four brothers: Behannan, Punoose, Eliyas, and Cherian; and one sister, Mariamma.

Thommy got his primary education from the famous Kudipallikudam Asan (primary school teacher), Tiruvalla Palliyil Asan. After that he joined the Church Missionary School in Thukalasseery (Tiruvalla) and learnt the basics of English, Mathematics and Bible reading. He was a very bright student, and so the school authorities wanted to send him to England for higher education. But his parents did not allow him to go to a foreign land.

Learning Syriac from Kovoov Gheevahese Kathanar

Kovoov Gheevahese Kathanar (a senior relative of Thommy) was vicar of Paliyekkara Palli, Tiruvalla. He was an expert in Syriac, and taught deacons in his house the worship songs and liturgy. Thommy who attended these Syriac classes became proficient in it. At the age of 16 he was able to recite the Syriac liturgy and hymns better than any of his contemporaries.

Thommy meets Mathews Mar Athanasius Metropolitan in Niranam

While the Mathews Mar Athanasius Metropolitan was visiting the Niranam Church, Thommy assisted him in one of the church services. Metropolitan was very impressed with Thommy's knowledge in Syriac as he could sing/chant the Syrian Hymns much better than in Malayalam.

Deaconship, Marriage, Priesthood

At the age of 16, in 1858 (1033 M.E), Eipe Thommy was ordained as deacon in the Kottayam Old seminary by Mathews Mar Athanasius Metropolitan. In 1859, Deacon Eipe Thommy married Elizhuba from the famous Marettu family in Kallooppara. In 1861, Eipe Thommy was ordained as priest by Euyakim Mar Kurilose Bava in the Paliyekkara Church in Tiruvalla.

Reformation of Abraham Malpan and Kovoov Achen

Abraham Malpan started the reformation movement in his native church in Maramon in 1837. Majority of the parish supported him and so he didn't face much opposition. Kaithayil Geevarghese Malpan from Puthupally was a strong supporter of Abraham Malpan.

Attracted by the ideologies of Abraham Malpan, Kovoov Achen began to implement certain changes in his home Parish in Tiruvalla. In those days church worship services were conducted in Syriac. Without knowing the meaning of even a single word, ordinary worshippers would say 'Amen' to the prayers of the clergy. Even the Gospel was read in Syriac.

Kovoov Achen translated the liturgy into Malayalam and conducted communion service in Malayalam. It was a great event, but many parish members did not accept the new form of service. Only around twelve members (out of the one thousand) in the Paliyekkara Church supported Achen. Even his own father and relatives were against him at first. But later they supported him.

Church members complained about Kovoov Achen's actions, but Mathews Mar Athanasius Metropolitan did not take any action against the young priest. To restrict Achen from conducting the church service, many civil and criminal cases were fabricated against him and petitions were sent to government authorities through the Tiruvalla Thasildhar. Many a time Achen was assaulted. His opponents even constructed a new church (Kattapuram Palli).

Kovoov Achen, Local leader

Malankara Metropolitan, Mathews Mar Athanasius, was a close friend of Kovoov Achen. Kovoov Achen took the initiative to construct the wooden bridge in front of the Paliyekkara church. Beautification of the Paliyekkara church was done by building compound walls and cleaning verandahs. With the help of the church office bearers, a proper system was introduced for the church accounts.

Kovoov Achen started prayer groups and prayer meetings in his parish. Lay people were given the opportunity to pray and conduct meetings.

Revival Movement

Revivalism is a special approach to religion or one's faith that gives importance to individual religious experience rather than the main doctrine. It is always associated with fervent emotional singing, preaching, confessing, dancing etc. The Syrian Church experienced many revival movements. Tirunelveli, Tamil

Nadu was the birth place of revival movements in South India. It started in 1860, by CMS Missionaries and came to Travancore through an unknown preacher called Mathai Upadeshi and carried on by Vidhuwan Kutty Achen (Rev. Justus Joseph). Koor Achen arranged meetings for Mathai Upadeshi in the Paliyekkara church.

In 1864, Mathews Mar Athanasius Metropolitan allowed Ammal and her sisters, the daughters of a famous Tamil convert, Vedanayaka Sastri, to visit churches and inspire people with their Christian Songs and poetic story presentations. They visited the Paliyekkara Church with an invitation from Koor Achen.

In 1873, Vidhuwan Kutty Achen and his brothers Mathai Kutty and Jacob Kutty became leaders of this movement. Prophet Koodarapallil Thomman from the Chenkulam village in Kottarakka was a good friend of Rev. Yustus Joseph and his brothers. Thomman prophesied *"Jesus Christ will come after six years (six years from 30 May, 1875) and in the seventh year all believers will be gathered to his kingdom. So turn away from your sins and change your life"*.

The CMS church authorities, ex-communicated Rev. Yustus from the Church on 9 Oct., 1875. A little more than a week later, on 18 October, 1875, Rev. Yustus Joseph established another Church, Kannetti Unarvu Sabha (Kannetti Revival Church). Rev. Yustus Joseph was the head of this church.

Many central Travancore Christians were attracted by this revival movement of Vidhuwan Kutty Achen. Thus Koor Achen faced two different situations. First, to introduce Abraham Malpan's reformation ideas in his parish for which he faced formidable opposition and secondly, to stop parishioners from following the new revival movement of Vidhuwan Kutty Achen.

After effects of Reformation

Due to the reformation, the Syrian church divided into two groups. The reformation group (Mar Thoma Church) stood for the independence of the Church. The other group accepted the supremacy of the Patriarch of Antioch. Metropolitan Mathews Mar Athanasius was accepted by both groups. But after his death, in 1877, a series of cases was filed against his successor, Thoma Mar Athanasius. The main case in Alleppey court (known as seminary case) against Thomas Mar Athanasius was filed by Joseph Mar Dionysius was decided on 1889, in the Royal Court of Appeal, Trivandrum against the reformation party. The reformation group lost almost all its property except the Maramon, Kozhencherry and Kottarakkara churches. Five old churches were given to each party to conduct services alternate weeks.

Mar Thoma Evangelistic Association was established in 1888. The Church magazine, Malankara Sabha Tharaka, started publishing in 1892.

Death of wife and uncle, and re-marriage

Kovoor Achen's Uncle Kovoor Gheeverhese Kathanar passed away in 1885 (M.E.1060) and Achen's wife was called home in 1888. The departure of his wife was a real shock to him. In 1895, Kovoor Achen married Mariamma, daughter of Mulamoottil Ittyerrah from Nedumpuram.

Vicar General

Kovoor Achen was designated as Vicar General in 1892. After the loss of Old Seminary in Kottayam, the Church administration was done in Aaramana in Maramon. In 1892, Kovoor Achen bought the Panchayathu Purayidam (present SCS Compound) for Rs.600 from the wealthy Ezahva family (Thittapallil) in Tiruvalla. They were not willing to sell the property at first but because they respected Kovoor Achen, they finally agreed.

Consecration of Titus I Mar Thoma

Thoma Mar Athanasius passed away in 1893, without consecrating a successor. But in 1894, Titus I Mar Thoma was consecrated at the Cheriya pally in Kottayam with the help of the Mar Kurilos Metropolitan of the Thozhiyur Church. The consecration was made possible by the then Vicar General, Kovoor Achen, and Thazahathu Chandapilla Kattanar (Vicar of Kottayam Cheriya pally).

Consecration of Titus II Mar Thoma

Titus II was consecrated by Titus I on 9 Dec.1898 at the Puthencavu Church. On 20 October, 1909, Titus I passed away. Even though Titus II and the Bishop Kurilos of the Thozhiyoor Church were present, the funeral service was conducted by Very Rev. Iype Thoma Kathanar and his assistant deacon M.O. Thomas. Many of the prayers and hymns were in Syriac. Titus II was consecrated as Metropolitan on 5 November, 1909. Being the Vicar general of the Church, Kovoor Achen played a key role for both these consecrations.

Kovoor Achen and Abraham Mar Thoma

Kallooppara Marettu M.N. Abraham became deacon on 30 April, 1911. Kovoor Achen was the chairman of the felicitation meeting held after the ordination. He was very impressed with the maturity and prayerful life of young deacon Abraham. So with the help of the foreign missionaries, Kovoor Achen took the

initiative to send Abraham to USA for higher education. In 1912, Deacon Abraham was sent to USA and returned in 1915. Later he was ordained as priest and on 28 December, 1917 he was consecrated as Bishop of the Mar Thoma Church. Kovoov Achen was not there to see the consecration (Achen passed away on 17 Jan, 1917).

Kovoov Achen in Politics

H.R.H. Moolam Thirunal (1885-1924) was the King of Travancore. One of the significant aspects associated with Maharaja Sree Moolam Thirunal's reign was the inauguration of the Legislative Council in 1888. This was the first legislative chamber, instituted in an Indian State. The Sri Moolam Assembly came into being in 1904. Respected persons from each taluk were selected as members of this assembly. Kovoov Achen was the representative from Tiruvalla.

In the first session of the assembly, Kovoov Achen made a commendable speech congratulating the king and the authorities for introducing democracy by establishing such an assembly in Travancore. For six years Achen was the representative from Tiruvalla.

Kovoov Achen a "great lawyer"

Kovoov Achen had only School education. He never went to a university or institution for higher education. He was well aware of the civil and criminal laws and procedures of the Travancore state. He was the accused (defendant) of many cases including one murder case fabricated and filed by his enemies to tarnish his personality and image. He argued many of his cases even without a lawyer, and his enemies lost. The judiciary and the police officers treated Achen with great respect.

Kovoov Achen, friend of Travancore Rulers and Divans

Kovoov Achen was a known personality in the Travancore Kingdom. Travancore Divans V.P. Madhavarao and P. Rajagoplachari had great respect and reverence for Achen.

Kettu Thengu

The Mar Thoma church was a poor church. To raise money for the developments of the parish Achen introduced "Kettu Thengu" (a system of dedicating the best coconut tree in each house for the Parish, and the coconuts from these trees was collected by the Parish).

Kovoor Achen, great logician and philosopher

Achen had instant answers for all questions. He was a logician and philosopher. It was impossible to defeat him in an argument. His wide experience in all walks of life made him a walking encyclopedia of knowledge. He had answers for riddles, puzzles and conundrums. On many occasions people tested him with twisted religious and secular questions, but he could answer them all.

Kovoor Achen, a man of courage

Because of his deep faith in God he was a courageous man, always fearless and daring. He could face any situation with fortitude. During the rift between the Jacobite and the Mar Thomomite churches, Kovoor Achen had to face insults from his own church in Paliyekkara. When Thomas Mar Athanasius passed way with out consecrating a successor the opposite party tried their best to stop the consecration of Titus I in the Kottayam church. But the consecration ceremony went on well due to the courageous leadership of Kovoor Achen and Chandapilla Kathanar (Thahzahu).

Kovoor Achen and Bible Society

When the Bible Society celebrated its centenary in 1904, Kovoor Achen was the representative from the Mar Thoma Church and spoke at the public meeting. Kovoor Achen was a member of the Malayalam Bible Revision committee. For his private meditation, Achen always used his Tamil Bible. He sang Tamil hymns as well. Achen formed Bible study groups in the parishes.

Kovoor Achen, Syriac Teacher

During Kovoor Achen's time many of our worship books were in Syriac. Many deacons and priests (sometimes up to 20) would stay with Achen to learn Syriac and the liturgy. He taught them in the Gurukulam system (students staying with the teacher to learn).

Selfless service of Kovoor Achen

When Achen was designated as the Vicar General of the Church, a monthly salary was fixed for him from the Church. But he never took his salary from the Church account, his services were completely voluntary.

Children of Kovoov Achen

Achen's first wife, Elizhuba (Aleyamma), was a member of the Marettu family in Kalloopara. They had 6 children, namely K.T. Eipe, K.T. Oommen, Kochumariamamma, K.T. Thomas, Kochannamma, and Sosamma. After Aleyamma's death, Achen married Mariamma from Mulamoottil family of Nedumpuram. Their children were K.T. Cherian, Dr. A.T. Kovoov, and Dr. K.T. Behanan.

Final days

Even though Achen suffered from severe rheumatism, he labored for the Church till the end. Even two week before his death he was in Kottayam for a church connected meeting. On the 1st and 8th January, 1917, he conducted church services in Tiruvalla. "*The great danger facing the present Church is the lack of sincere workers*" he would repeat these words in all his messages. On 12 January, 1917, he had a lengthy discussion with Mar Thoma Church Secretary, Mr. Varghese about the future of the Church.

Achen was aware that his race is going to finish. In his own handwriting he made a 39 page document (will) regarding his family property and personal possessions. On 16 January, 1917, he became sick. Even in his death bed he was concerned about the future of the Mar Thoma Church.

For Kovoov Achen, death was a transfer with promotion. At 4.00 pm on Saturday 27 January, 1917, Kovoov Achen passed away peacefully to be with his master. The funeral service was conducted by Metropolitan Titus II. A large crowd comprising of priests, laymen and people from all walks of life came for the funeral. Achen's body was buried in the SCS compound just behind the SCS Church. As a token of respect, all schools under the Mar Thoma Management remained closed for a day. Condolence messages were received from heads of sister churches, political leaders and leaders of other religions.

VGM Hall in Tiruvalla

The VGM Hall (Vicar General Iype Thoma Kathanar Memorial Hall) in the SCS compound in Tiruvalla stands as a memory of Achen's great life.



Main Events connected with life of Koor Achen

- 1837 Abraham Malpan conducts Holy Communion Service in Malayalam with the new liturgy (Chingham 15, 1013 M.E)
- 1838 Beginning of CMS College, Kottayam
- 1841-1842 Publication of Complete Bible in Malayalam, Bailey's translation.
- 1842 Consecration of Mathews Mar Athanasius in Mardin, Syria,
- 1842 Dec 2 Birth of Koor Achen
- 1843 Mathews Mar Athanasius arrives in Cochin from Mardin in Syria.
- 1845 Abraham Malpan passes away
- 1846 Mar Coorilos Bava arrives in Malankara
- 1858 Thomaskutty becomes deacon
- 1859 Koor Achen's mother passes away
- 1859 First marriage, wife Elizhubha-Marettu, Kallooppara
- 1860 Revival movement starts in Thirunelveli
- 1861 Deacon Koor becomes priest
- 1863 Revival movement reaches in Nagercoil, CMS Parish
- 1865 Daughters of Vadanayakam Sastri arrive in Travancore for gospel work
- 1868 Koor Achen becomes the Vicar of Karakkal Parish
- 1873 Koor Achen publishes liturgy of Abraham Malpan
- 1873 Revival movement reaches Central Travancore
- 1873-81 Prime time of Revival Movement
- 1874 Koor Achen's father passes away
- 1875 Patriarch Pathros arrives in Kerala
- 1875 May 30 Koodarappallil Thomman declares Jesus Christ will come after six years on 2 Oct 1881.
- 1876 Aug10-12 Koodarappalil Thomman & Omallur Eappen declared that total darkness would cover the world (But it never happened)
- 1877 Koor Achen establishes a primary school in Tiruvalla
- 1877 Mathews Mar Athanasius passes away
- 1878 Jul 25 Omallur Eappen commits suicide.
- 1880 Oct. 30 Birth of Abraham Mar Thoma
- 1883 Nov 29 Birth of Sadhu Kochoonju Upadeshi
- 1888 Koor Achen's first wife passes away
- 1888 Sept. 5 Formation of Mar Thoma Evangelistic Association
- 1889 Evangelist Laxmanan Rao arrives in Tiruvalla
- 1891 Anniversary meeting of the Evangelistic Association, under Koor Achen's Chairmanship
- 1895 Koor Achen remarries
- 1898 Dec 9 Consecration of Titus I Mar Thoma
- 1904 Paliyakkara Church given to Orthodox Church as per agreement
- 1905 Koor Achen becomes a member of Prajasabha
- 1905 Feb 25 Formation of Mar Thoma Sunday School Samajam
- 1909 First Mission field outside Kerala, Karwar Mission
- 1909 Oct. 20 Metropolitan Titus I Passes away.

- 1910 First Mar Thoma Students conference
 1911 Apr 30 M.N. Abraham (Abraham Marthoma) is ordained as Deacon in the Mar Thoma Church Tiruvalla
 1912 Jul M.N. Abraham does his higher studies in USA
 1914 Jun 28 Beginning of the First World War
 1914 Nov. M.N. Abraham returns to India M.A., B.D. degrees
 1915 Dec 5 M.N. Abraham becomes a Priest in Mar Thoma Church Eraviperoor
 1915 Abraham Marthoma becomes parish priest (vicar) of Mar Thoma Church, Kayamkulam
 1917 Jan. 27 Koor Achen, Ipe Thoma Kathanar, passes away



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The End

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