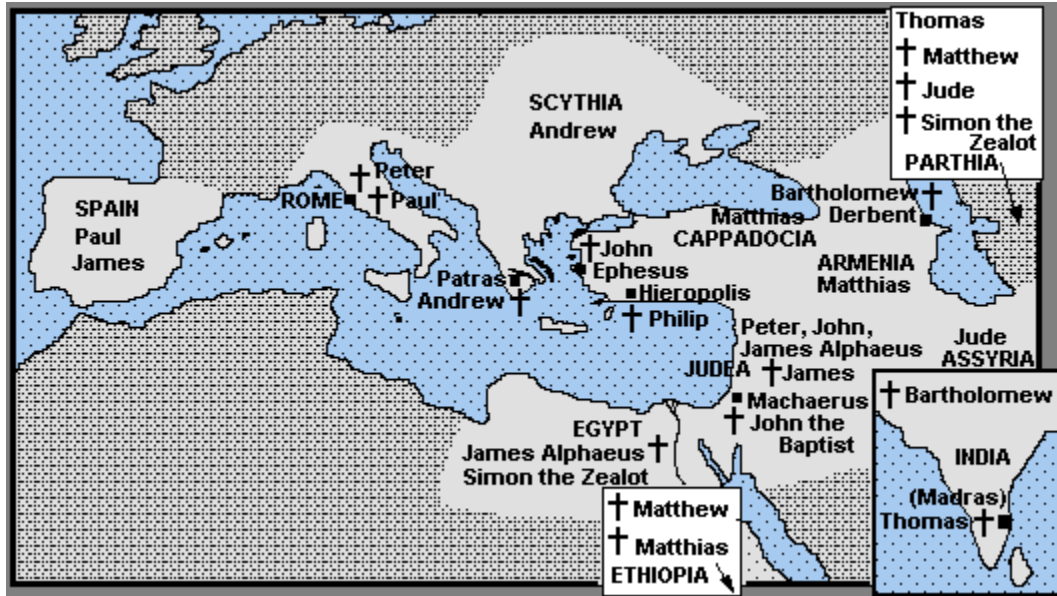


East Indians

(the indigenous Catholic inhabitants of Bombay, Salsette and Bassein)



Though It is commonly thought that the origin of Christianity in North Konkan, was due to the proselytizing activities of the Portuguese in the 16th Century. It was, St. Bartholomew, one of the twelve Apostles of Christ, who preached in North Konkan .

There are indisputable evidences of this fact by the writings of Kosmos Indicopleustes of his having seen in Kalyana a flourishing Christian Community in the 6th Century and of Jordanus, of his having labored among the Christians in Thana and Sopara in the 13th Century. Friar Jordanus's evangelizing activities in Thana and Sapora was the first work of Rome in North Konkan.

Sopara was an ancient port and an international trading center. The water once extended all the way to Bhyander creek thus making the whole area extending from Arnala to Bhyander an island - referred to as Salsatte island.

In the time of the Buddha, Sopara, (Ancient Shurparaka), was an important port and a gateway settlement. Perhaps this induced Ashoka to install his edicts there. Sopara is referred in the Old Testament as Ophir, the place from which King Solomon brought gold; 1 Kings 9:28, 10:11. Cf. Psalms 45:9, Isaiah 13:12. Josephus identifies Ophir with Aurea Chersonesus, belonging to India (Antiquities 8:6:4). Septuagint translates Ophir as Sophia, which is Coptic for India. This refers to the ancient city of Soupara or Ouppara on the western coast of India.

It should then come as no surprise that contact with India dates as far back as the days of King Solomon.

Pantaneus visited India about AD 180 and there he found a *Gospel of Matthew* written in Hebrew language, left with the Christians there by St. Bartholomew. This is mentioned by Eusebius, and by Jerome in one of his letters. The finding of a *Gospel of Matthew* left with the Christians by Bartholomew is very strong evidence to the existence of a Christian community in India in the first century at the time of the visit of St. Bartholomew. It traces the history of the Church in India to the first century. In fact it is an independent confirmation of the Indian church's ancient and apostolic origin

Most history of The Indian Church was lost between the 9th and the 14th Century, as Persia went over to the Nestorianism in 800 AD. Since the provision of Church offices and all the apparatus of public worship, was looked to a foreign source; when this foreign aid was withdrawn. the Indian Christians were reduced to 'nominal' Christians.

The Portuguese came to India in 1498 'to evangelize and trade'. Little did they know that they had come to a land which had the unique distinction of having heard the preaching of two of the Apostles of Christ, St. Thomas and St. Bartholomew. None of them made the slightest attempt to understand the venerable civilization of Indian so much more ancient than their own, into which they had intruded.

The whole policy of the Portuguese, who came to India in 1498, was to bring the Indian Christians under their concept of Roman Catholicism. The Bramhins Prabhu and other high-class hindus who were prudently and ceremoniously converted were treated by the Portuguese with honor and distinction. In stark contrast, was the attitude of the Portuguese to those groups who were engaged in cultivation, fishing and other rural occupations handed down to them by their ancestors. These groups were given neither education, not proper instructions in the dogmas and doctrines of the church. Among the converts the Portuguese made, it cannot be denied that a large number of them were decendants of the Christian Community founded by Apostle St. Barthmolew . But these new converts were not strangers to the old Christians. They were their own people with whom they had been living for centuries. The Portuguese however welded them into one community. Ever since then, this community has remained a separate entity, without becoming one with any of the other Christian Community. In certain instance, they were even referred to as 'Portuguese Christians'.

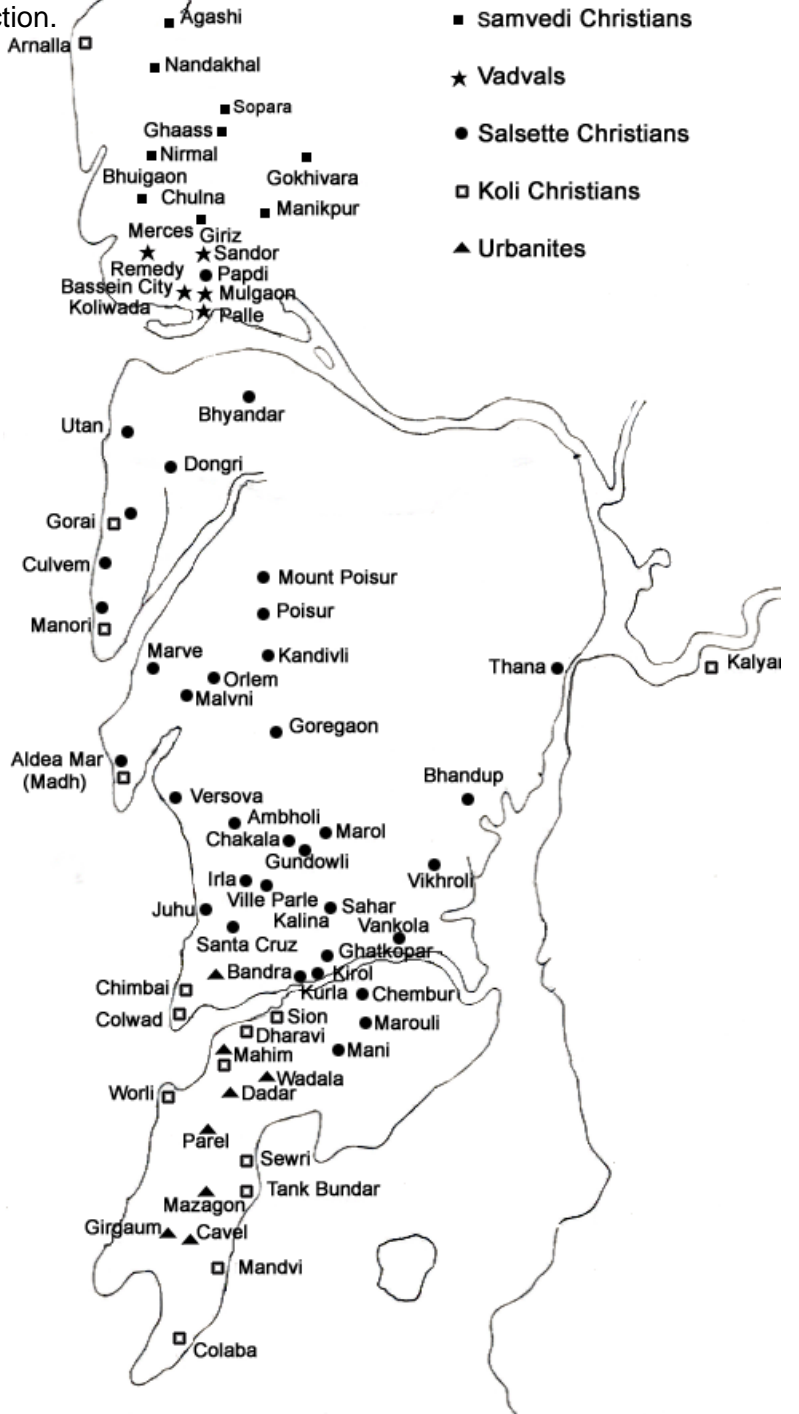
With the defeat of the Portuguese at the hands of the Marathas and later on the advent of the British, there came a lot of change. Fortunately, for the Portuguese Christians, they were the only people in the regions, who were able to read the Roman characters, and it was from this class that the British drew its supply of clerks, assistants and secretaries.

From the early days of the East India Company, there were no other Indian Christians in the North Konkan except the **Christians of the soil**. Employments that were intended for the Christians, was the monopoly of the Indian Christians of the soil. With development, came in railways and steamship, a boon for the traveling public. And with that came a number of emigrants from Goa which were also known as Portuguese Christians. The British found it expedient to adopt a designation which would distinguish the Christians of North Konkan who were British subjects and the Goans who were Portuguese subjects.

Accordingly on the occasion of The Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, the Christian of North Konkan, who were known as 'Portuguese Christians' discarded that name and adopted the designation 'East Indian'.

By the adoption of the name 'East Indian' they wanted to impress upon the British Government of Bombay that they were the earliest Roman Catholic Subjects of the British Crown in this part of India, is as much as Bombay, by its cession in 1661, was the first foothold the Britiash acquired in India. As the children of the soil, they urged on the Government, that they were entitled to certain natural rights and priveledges as against the emigrants.

The five Broad Cultural Groups are the Samvedi Christians, Koli Christians, Vadvals, Salsette Christians and the urbanized section.



Above is based on Elsie Baptista's "East Indians of Bombay" and information available on the internet.

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