

## **Visit to India and Tracks for a Train of Thought**

In the region known as Turabdin (in southeastern Turkey), the Deyrulzafaran Monastery, made of stones delicately woven together, each shaped by Syriac spiritual life, is beloved. Deyrulzafaran lived intertwined within Syriac history, and because of that history it became a virtual monument.

On a dominant slope five miles east of Mardin, Deyrulzafaran carries its past up until the present day. It was constructed over a pre-Christian temple, in the fifth century AD. In its dignified posture, with her authentic and mystical atmosphere, it is a rare monastery, able to confront people with interior dimensions, and capable of transforming them to an inner harmony.

This monastery, together with its history, offers simplicity to life. It was founded, like other Syriac monasteries, in the early centuries of the Christian faith, adopting the principal of Christ's unconditional love, with the goals of living out the spiritual life and developing it. It offered great service to humanity in the realms of scholarship and culture. The brightest period was the 9th and 10th centuries, when its clerical high school, and its role in the study of logic, and of all the natural sciences made it famous.

In the long years of its history, the monastery raised up 21 patriarchs, 9 catholicos, 120 bishops and many monks, priests and famous Syriac writers and teachers. Up until the year of 1932, Deyrulzafaran served for a total of 640 years as the patriarchal center of the Syriac Christians. More than anything else, that is what made it a famous religious house.

The last patriarch to serve in Mardin and Deyrulzafaran was Mor Ignatius III Ilyas Şakir. In 1931 in order to still the waves in the Church and secure peace, he departed for India. On February 13, 1932 when he died of a heart attack in India,

the Syriac church officials here appointed the day as The Feast of St. Ignatius Ilyas III. The Day of Ilyas was well received. The Christians here in India celebrate the Feast in Ilyas's name with glorious ceremonies in the form of a carnival. Hundreds of thousands of people come from afar (400-500km), to the St. Ignatius Monastery where his grave and name are enshrined, walking along the way en-masse, some on bare feet. Even if we did not learn the feelings and the trembling in spirit of these pilgrims whom we met along their route, and among whom we immersed ourselves, it was possible to get some sense of their devotion and faith.

Annually, the Syriac Patriarchate of Antioch, in Damascus, assigns a different metropolitan bishop to preside over the ceremonies in India. February 2006 the Mardin Syriac Episcopate recieved the priviledge.

In the year of 2006, from February 9th to the 20th, a delegation of eight from Mardin and Istanbul, together with our metropolitan bishop Mor Filoxenus Saliba Özmen, lived full and rich days together in Kerala, India. Our group was composed of: Raban Gabriel Akkurt of Deyrulzafaran, Suphi Gül and Murat Özbek of the Mardin Syriac board of directors, Sait Susin and his wife Emel, Amanuel Abaci and his wife Semra from the Istanbul Syriac board of directors, and me, Yusuf Beğtaş. Because Patriarch Ignatius III Ilyas Şakir was born in Mardin and went to India from the Deyrulzafaran monastery, our Mardin delegation's presence there stirred up distinct memories and brought the past to life. That explains why our visit lent a distinct kind of excitement to those in attendance.

When the Syriac traveler tours the Syriac churches of India, he begins to grasp the presence of the historical relationships between Mardin and India. The presence here in India througout history of persons from Mardin at the level of metropolitan bishops, catholicos, and patriarch, who endured so many sacrifices

for the sake of ministry, and who layed down their lives here, constitutes the jugular vein of these historic relations. The churches and monasteries which are called by their names, keep their memory alive as a debt of faithfulness. On designated days of the year the Christians here commemorate these respected persons. Because these individuals were not only a source of inspiration, but they really pumped new blood into the churches.

In every place and church we visited, the intellectual and spiritual experiences of these persons, who were able to filter Christ-centered teachings through the prism of the practice of earthly life virtually embraced me. The dominance of green foliage was so intense. Sometimes I felt that in the depth and limitlessness of the forest cover I had entered a deep pit of irradecent verdancy. As we walked, I was trying to feel the experiences of those Mesopotamian Syrac fathers who could only tell their the troubles and stresses to the winding and wending paths covered with green to the right and the left. The more I felt, the more the difficulties they bore for the sake of the church and the faith, came alive before my eyes like a movie. Every place we visited brought my mind forward to the future and my spirit back to past ages.

Here, the social strata and life together, in mutual tolerance, weaving in and out of each other like braided hair, arrests the attention of the observer. Despite such huge crowds of people, the absence of policemen, excepting those directing traffic at the intersections, shows the gentle social climate. It is nurtured by differing religions like Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. It was not as if I did not think, when I saw the hands of the lame, the cripple, and the handicapped at the sides of the road, stretched out for alms, that I was living in the harmony of opposites. The way those individuals hang on to life while blackened with exposure, makes a burning impression on the heart.

During our visit here, our bishop performed five holy masses in various jam-packed churches. In the sermons after the masses, he would explain the Syriac Patriarchate's historical mission in India and pass on the well wishes of His Holiness Patriarch Mor Ignatius Zakka Iwas. Along with this, he would mention the positive contributions of Mardin and the Deyrulzafaran monastery to India's Syriac church and indicate the need to give their attention to the revival of the Syriac language here.

The glorious receptions we experienced at the entrance to churches in the various places we visited explains everything. It was truly worth seeing the reception which the Blessed Eastern Catholicos Mor Baselius I Toma gave to our metropolitan bishop, who came in the status of a patriarchal ambassador, during the opening of an orphanage and homeless shelter named Kefa, and dedicated to His Holiness our Patriarch Moran Mor Ignatius Zakka Iwas. It was a unique moment for us. The mountains, rocks, plains, and trees were transformed into masses of humanity. The hymns, sung from the depths of their hearts, echoing in nature's green beauty and silence, embraced everyone. I was encountering scenes that reminded me of Christ's entrance to Jerusalem. The experience brought me to the depths, to the early ages of the Christian faith. The speech our bishop gave on that occasion touched my senses like water laps the shore, and demonstrated that two separate individuals can feel the same emotions.

So far as I could observe, the patriarchal ambassador's visit had positive effects on the organism of the Syriac Church of India. The slogans and the acclamations of the crowds made us feel their devotion to the Patriarchate of Antioch and its Chair.

I can still feel the delight that our experiences generated. Another line of thought made me I count myself lucky to be able to see the homeland of Gandhi. During

the visit the internal righteousness that filters through Gandi's words, **"live life as you want to see it"** accompanied me everywhere.

So far as I see, the Indian Christians' active participation in Mass and hymns by keeping the ancient tradition alive here, is vivifying their spirits and making them whole. With these effects, but with different conditions, it seems that they have partly opened the way to social and inner happiness. In spite of their misery and poverty, what to us can be superficial, turns out for them to be true depth. It gives me pleasure to witness the interior life, through real authenticity, solidify wholeness thought during the Mass. I think that it would be useful to bring back into our own understanding, as it was in old times, some of the outstanding usages found in the order and rituals of the Church practiced here.

It is worthwhile to examine the simplicity of the interior life reflected outward, here in India. The spiritual life that develops through the masses, conferences, seminars and meetings and various similar activities held under the auspices of the Church, breaks people out of a shallow and superficial life and carries them into a deeper lifestyle. The requirements of spiritual discipline do not belong to the clergy alone. All individuals whom Christ remembers as his brothers and sisters strive to fulfil the requirements of spiritual discipline. When this is the situation, people feel the joy residing in the essence of discipline. And so people are not only saved from the sickness of only looking after themselves, and from their fears; they also throw off the burdens on their hearts and the troubles of their souls. The sincere shouts of joy with which they accompany the hymns, and the hands they raise earnestly toward heaven in the masses of the churches, indicate a tremendous release. The body language of the hands and their extension heavenward also brings a sense of the thirst for the life of the Lord, together with a sense of spiritual longing in the life of the worshipers.

St. Augustine (354-430) says, **“For God to be found, he should be sought more sweetly; for men to seek him more fervently, he must be found.”** In response to that I say that the greatest treasure the Lord has given human beings is life. The pathway toward discovering this treasure passes through the explanation of what the human being is. The one who tries to understand the human being is the one who is living with the consciousness of duty and mission. Such a person is in the heart and center of this treasure. They experience the rich delight that comes from giving value to, loving, helping, and developing the most precious of all of God’s treasures on earth.

Another comment by St. Augustine about social life is, **“The world is a wonderful book; those who do not go out of their homes only read a one page of it.”** This visit to India, along with renewing me spiritually and stirring my emotions, awakened in me distinct associations, awarenesses, and thoughts. It was virtually like a return journey to the essence. It was as if I was not in India. My Beautiful stretched out and reclined in the arms of the journey, and while she was participating actively in the masses of the churches, she was also doing exercises of thought in the temple of my pathway, having plunged deep into musings.

While I was trying to understand why human beings, who seek to produce solutions to every problem, are powerless when they try to solve their greatest problem—moral and spiritual blockage, I became persuaded that life is not so shallow as to be left to chance. This persuasion solidified more after meeting a Syriac doctor who, with his team, treated hundreds of people daily without charge, told us, **“God gave freely to me, and I give freely to people.”** I still try to internalize the beautiful offerings and deep knowledge that this doctor, a man of science, presented. He had taken ownership of the principle, **“Not, what can I get? But rather, what can I give to people?”** And I learned that if a person can form his life according to spiritual principles, some problems resolve

themselves with ease. This road passes through a new order of the self: The spirit being captain of the body.

The spirit is like a multi-faceted crystal made of the material of love. This crystal is covered in a mud called ego. The meaning of life is to clean the mud off and make the essence of the crystal shine. Without this shining, or making to shine, love, which is the high energy of life, will not develop. The person who is able to discover his interior self and make his essence to shine by cleaning off the mud, is mature. This individual finds his true self by being. The fundamental measure he places on his value system is not the external appearance but the inner man. As Jesus Christ said, **“It is not what goes into a person that defiles him, but what comes from within a person”** (Mark 7:18). Those who are not able to discover their interior self are those who cannot clean off the egotistic mud. Though they are adults, they are childish. These individuals find themselves by ownership. The standard of their value system is external appearance.

That is why these words of John Chrysostom (340-404) have no place among them: **“Whatever is to the benefit of your brother, speak only that. Do not add even one thing to that. Because God has given you a mouth and tongue for this purpose. He gave it so that it may offer thanks and edify your brother.”**

It should not be forgotten that inner and spiritual beauty offers vital importance to the social and religious life of the Christian individual. Because the valuable thing in the sight of God is not the external appearance but the inner appearance. The New Testament explains it this way: **“Let your adornment be in your inner being, with the unfading beauty of meekness”** (I Peter 3:3).

However you want to see life, that is the way it will appear. In India I saw what I wanted to see. Perhaps that is because I focused more on the rose than on the

thorns. But really I think these kinds of visits are useful for discovering the limiting beliefs we have, and for exchanging them with empowering beliefs.

I don't know about the others members of the delagation, but for me this visit was not only like reading a new page, it was like reading a whole new book. If you wish to climb to the summits of your spirit, you too can try a journey to the churches of India. But you must be sure that the pathways of your heart are open. To the extent that an individual can traverse the high spiritual slopes he will see that he is learning and continually growing.

And he will be able to better internalize the words of India's great poet Rabindranath Tagore: **"I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy."**

**Malfono Yusuf Beğtaş**